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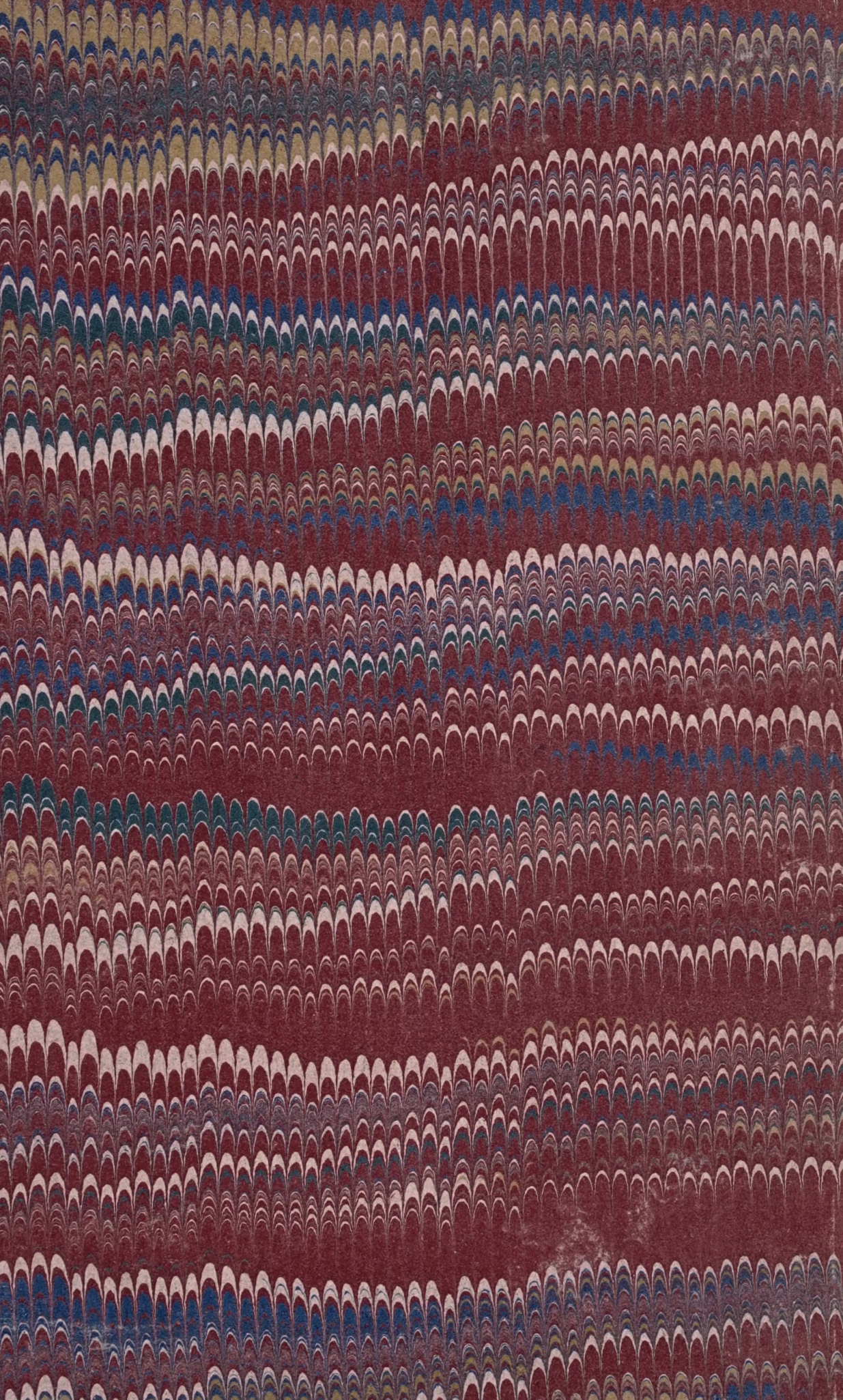

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THE
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LADY CLARE;

OR,

THE MASTER OF THE FORGES.

From the French of Georges Ohnet.

17 TO 27 VANDEWATER ST
NEW YORK
George Munro
PUBLISHER

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The Master of the Forges.

The Iron Master

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THE MASTER OF THE FORGES.

CHAPTER I.

On a bright day in October, 1880, a young man in elegant hunting costume was seated on the border of one of the beautiful oak woods whose cool shades overspread the first slopes of the Jura. A large chestnut spaniel lay on the heather a few paces from his master, his watchful eyes fastened on him as if waiting for the signal to be off again.

But the huntsman seemed in no mood to renew the chase. He had rested his gun against the trunk of a tree, flung his empty game-bag to the other side of the ditch, and with his back turned to the sun, his chin resting on his hand, his eyes wandered over the beautiful panorama which lay before him.

Across the road by which he had stopped the wood was skirted by a young coppice whose thinly scattered clusters rose like islets of verdure from the midst of ferns and yellow grasses. Through the trees of the woodland as it sloped gently to the valley below could be caught glimpses of the town of Pont-Avesnes, the slate-colored bell-tower of the old church rising conically above its red roofs. To the right, the château, surrounded by large trenches well drained and planted with fruit trees. The Avesnes, a streamlet ambitiously styled by the inhabitants "the river," gleamed like a silver ribbon through the willows whose trembling foliage drooped over its banks. Further on, a fiery smoke was spitting from the tall furnaces of the manufactory which stretched out its black walls at the foot of the hill, with its stratum of rock pierced with holes for the extraction of the ore. Above these excavations grew vines yielding a white wine with a flavor of gunflint, commonly sold under the name of *vin de Moselle*. The sky, of a pale blue, was flooded with light, while a transparent mist floated like a thin veil over the heights. Profound peace reigned throughout the smiling landscape. Through the clear atmosphere the muffled sound of the hammers at the forge ascended to the forest from the valley below.

The young huntsman remained motionless, subdued as it were by the stillness. Gradually the landscape faded from his view, a feeling of profound serenity stole over him, and his thoughts began to wander with delicious vagueness over a misty past. The sun gilded the forest tops, a tranquilizing warmth rose from the heather; the silence of the woods grew more profound.

He was roused suddenly from his reverie by a cold nose which

rested on his knees, and a pair of eyes, human in their gaze, looked up at him in mute appeal.

"Ah! you are tired of waiting, old fellow! Come, don't be impatient, we are going."

And drawing a long breath, he rose, replaced his game-bag in his belt, passed his gun under his arm, and crossing the road leaped a small ditch and entered the coppice. The dog was already beating down the tall grass. Suddenly he stopped beside a thicket with his paw lifted, his head bent upward motionless, as if turned to stone, shaking his tail softly with an appealing look at his master. The latter made one or two hasty steps and in the same instant a hare darted from its cover and sped away like a ball. The young man aimed his gun and fired quickly, but when the smoke cleared away he was more vexed than surprised to discover that his hare had vanished into the woods.

"Another miss!" he muttered. And turning to the spaniel who stood waiting for him with an air of resignation: "It was too bad, wasn't it? You pointed so well."

At the same moment another shot was heard a hundred metres off, and in a second more the sound of a footstep. The branches were put aside and a stalwart youth in a blue linen hunting-blouse, large boots, and an old slouch hat appeared at the edge of the wood, a gun in one hand, and in the other the hare that had just darted from its retreat.

"Your luck has been better than mine it appears," said the young huntsman, smilingly, advancing toward the new-comer.

"Ah! it was you then who fired," said the youth in the blouse.

"Yes, and awkwardly enough, for the animal started before my eyes, and I fired at twenty paces distance."

"It was not brilliant, truly," said the young man, with a shade of irony; "but how happens it, monsieur, that you hunt in this part of the woods?"

"Why," said the young man in some surprise, "because I have the right, as I think—"

"I think not, monsieur; these are the woods of Monsieur Derblay, who permits no one to set foot in them."

"Ah! the iron-master of Pont-Avesnes," resumed the young man, haughtily. "If I have trespassed on his grounds it was ignorantly, and I regret it. You are doubtless Monsieur Derblay's guard?"

"And who are you, may I ask?" said the young man in the blouse, without replying to the question.

"I am the Marquis de Beaulieu, and I beg you to believe that it is not my habit to poach."

The man in the blouse reddened and bowed deferentially.

"Pardon me, Monsieur the Marquis. Had I known who you are I should not have demanded explanations. Continue your hunt I beg."

While his interlocutor was speaking, the young huntsman had observed him more attentively. He was a good-looking youth despite his rustic attire. His face, framed in a black beard, was handsome and intelligent, his hands shapely and well cared for, and the gun suspended from his shoulder was of a rich simplicity that could have been the work only of an English gunsmith.

"Thank you," replied the marquis, coldly. "I have not the honor to know Monsieur Derblay save as a troublesome neighbor with whom we are on no good terms, and I shall be careful to avoid firing another shot on his grounds. I reached Beaulieu only yesterday, am not yet familiar with the country, and my love of sport has enticed me beyond our limits. It shall not occur again."

"As you please, monsieur," said the man in the blouse gently. "But I will answer for Monsieur Derblay that he would have been happy in this instance to prove that it is not his wish to be a troublesome neighbor. If he has encroached on Beaulieu with his mining railway, he is ready to make any amends for it. The boundaries between neighbors are often uncertain as you have occasion to know," he added, with a smile. "Do not judge Monsieur Derblay till you know him."

"You are a friend of the iron master?" said the marquis, looking at him, "an employé perhaps, for you defend him with a warmth—"

"Which is quite natural, be assured." And changing the subject: "But you have been unlucky it appears both at Beaulieu and at Pont-Avesnes. Monsieur Derblay has much pride in his hunting-grounds, and would regret to have you take leave of them empty-handed. Do me the favor to accept this hare which you were so kind as to beat up, together with these four partridges."

"I cannot," replied the marquis, quickly; "do not insist, I beg."

"I must insist, at the risk of displeasing you. I leave them on the other side of the ditch, you may abandon them to the foxes if you will. I have the honor to bid you good-day, Monsieur the Marquis."

And with one stride he re-entered the wood and moved off rapidly.

"Monsieur!" cried the marquis. But the huntsman was already out of sight.

"This is a singular adventure," muttered the marquis; "what am I to do?"

His perplexities were put an end to by an unexpected intervention. The spaniel had gone to the ditch, and taking a partridge carefully in his mouth, brought it to his master.

"You do not want us to return with an empty bag, do you?" said the marquis, laughing and caressing the dog.

And placing the hare and the four partridges in his game-bag, with a step less active from the unaccustomed weight, the young man set out homeward.

The Château of Beaulieu was a white stone building in Louis Thirteenth style, consisting of a main building and two wings; the pointed roofs of the wings surmounted with sculptured chimneys. Along its front extended a terrace five hundred metres in length, arranged in flower plots to which descended a flight of steps forming a grotto beneath. Festoons of flowering vines intertwined with the wrought iron balustrade offered to the hand a perfumed support. This terrace exposed to the midday sun furnished toward the end of the season a delightful promenade. The hill on which the château was built, facing the vineyards and quarries of Pont-Avesnes was encircled with a park sixty acres in extent, descending in a gentle slope to the valley. M. Derblay's manufactory had marred a little

the beauty of the landscape and its peaceful repose, but the habitation was still one of the most enviable.

Nevertheless it had remained for long years unoccupied. The Marquis de Beaulieu, father of the young huntsman coming at the age of twenty into possession of a splendid fortune, entered upon a dashing life in Paris. He passed, however, three months during the hunting season at Beaulieu, when his sumptuous prodigality served to enrich the country for the remainder of the year.

During the Revolution of 1848, the vine-growers of Pont-Avesnes had recompensed the marquis' bounty by plundering the château. Armed with scythes and pitchforks and shouting the Marseillaise they forced the gate—which the concierge obstinately refused to open to them—destroying what they could not carry away. Some of the well informed among them finding their way to the cellars, they passed from pillage to feasting. The marquis' wines were choice, and the vine-growers were connoisseurs. With intoxication they returned to violence, and scattering through the carefully tended conservatories, the brutes set to trampling down the flowers and destroying the marble vases. A handsome Flore de Pradier stood on a pedestal, above a mass of verdure, with a cascade emptying into a stone-basin at its feet. A madman was about to gash the lovely features with his scythe when the most drunken among them with a sudden access of sensibility planted himself in front of the chef d'œuvre, declaring himself a friend to the arts, and threatening to plant his pitchfork in the first person who should touch the statue. The Flore was saved, but to make amends a young poplar was uprooted, ornamented with red rags, and planted in the middle of the terrace. After which they returned to the town, shouting, and continuing their revolutionary orgies till night. The next morning a brigade of gendarmerie arrived and order was quickly restored.

On learning the news of this demonstration the marquis at first laughed. Since he had loaded Pont-Avesnes with his benefits it was quite natural they should seek to do him harm. He lost his equanimity only upon being told of the tree of liberty. This was carrying a joke beyond all bounds. He sent an order to his gardener to uproot the young poplar, cut it in pieces, and send it to Paris for his special burning. He sent five hundred francs to the drunken friend of chefs d'œuvres, and at the same time an assurance to the inhabitants of Pont-Avesnes, that he should revenge himself by never again setting foot at Beaulieu.

This quarantining of himself was equivalent to a loss of at least twenty thousand francs a year to the town. Attempts were made to approach him through its mayor, and a petition was signed by the municipal council, but all in vain. The marquis would not forgive the tree of liberty, and the château of Beaulieu remained closed.

The seductions of Parisian life had, however, their share in the marquis' resolution; clubs, theaters, the turf, and gallantry detained him more surely from Beaulieu than the rancor which he cherished against his countrymen. But at the end of a few years of this life of excitement, the marquis began to weary of it all, and in a moment of seriousness he married.

His young wife, daughter of the Duke de Bligny, adored

him and shut her eyes to his shortcomings. He was in fact a charming prodigal with hand and heart always open; incapable of resisting a wish of his wife's but capable of making her die of grief, to be atoned for by lamenting her bitterly. When the marchioness upbraided him for some outrageous folly, he would kiss her hand and say with tears in his eyes; "You are a saint;" and the next day begin again.

The honeymoon of the young pair lasted three years; very virtuous in a man like the marquis. Two children were born, a son and daughter, and grew up by their mother's side; Octave, the image of his mother, with her gentleness and gayety; Claire, with the impetuous, ardent temperament of her father. Education may control and discipline but it cannot change nature. Octave had matured into the amiable young man, Claire into the proud stately girl, of whom they had given promise.

Grief and misfortune brought them a companion. The Duke de Bligny, a widower, with an only son, having been killed by means of a runaway horse on a racing ground, the young Gaston left an orphan, with an impaired fortune, was conveyed after the funeral to his aunt's the marchioness, and remaining with her grew up beside Octave and Claire. Older than they, he exhibited already the charm and elegance of an aristocratic race. But the life of dissipation which his father had led had left him little leisure to watch over his son, and abandoned to the care of servants, initiated by them into their low intrigues, and sometimes accompanying his father to his parties of pleasure, the child's innocence had been put to a severe trial. A feeble boy of a melancholy temperament when brought to the Beaulieu hotel, in the atmosphere of this family life he had recovered the graces and freshness of youth.

At the age of nineteen he began to perceive that his cousin Claire, his junior by four years, was no longer a child. Like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis she had suddenly expanded in all the radiance of her blonde beauty. And Gaston loved her, but his secret he kept shut up in his own breast. A time of mourning betrayed it.

The Marquis de Beaulieu died suddenly, disappearing quietly from life *à l'anglaise*: that is to say he was not ill, he simply ceased to live. He was found lying in his working cabinet, where he had been in the act of turning over a file of papers relating to a lawsuit in which he had engaged with some English collaterals. The unaccustomed work had not agreed with him.

The physicians pronounced the cause of the marquis' death to be the rupture of an artery. His club friends shook their heads and whispered among themselves that he had, like many, paid the debt of the fast life he had led. Others believed that revelations made to this splendid spendthrift by his man of business had killed him not less certainly than if they had lodged a bullet in his breast.

The family of the marquis were too much absorbed in grieving over his death to concern themselves as to its cause. M. de Beaulieu was loved and respected as though he had been a model father and husband. The marchioness placed her household in mourning and celebrated his funeral with princely obsequies. Octave, now Marquis de Beaulieu, and the Duke de Bligny, his adopted brother, the chief mourners, were attended on the occasion by the oldest nobility

of France. On their return to the silent gloomy mansion where Octave and Claire awaited them, the marchioness shut herself in her chamber with Octave to talk over their future, while Gaston accompanied Claire to the garden.

It was a beautiful summer evening. The shadows were deepening under the great trees and the air was laden with perfume. They walked slowly and in silence around the greensward, absorbed in their own thoughts, till with one accord they sunk on a stone bench where a jet of water was singing in a marble basin at their feet, lulling them to deeper reverie. Gaston suddenly broke the silence; he told Claire in rapid words of his grief in the loss of the man who had been a father to him, and letting his head drop on her hot hands exclaimed:

"I can never forget what your family have been to me. Whatever happens, you will find me always at your side, I love you so." And he repeated between his sobs: "I love you! I love you!"

Claire raised Gaston's head gently, blushing and embarrassed, and said, smiling softly:

"I too love you."

She placed her hands on his mouth and touched his brow lightly with her lips as if solemnly to seal their betrothal. Then they resumed their walk without a word spoken, listening only to the voice of their own hearts.

The next day Octave de Beaulieu began his law studies, and Gaston entered the ministry of foreign affairs. The republican government was then seeking to attach to itself the great names of the aristocracy in order to reassure Europe, which observed the democracy triumphing with anxious eyes. The young duke was given a place in the cabinet of M. Decazes, and his diplomatic career promised to be brilliant. His elegant bearing, handsome face, and charming conversation, made him a sensation in the society into which he now found himself launched; but he remained indifferent to all but Claire, his best evenings being those that he passed in his aunt's little salon looking at his cousin as she bent over her embroidery, devouring in silence the wanton curls that grazed her neck, gleaming golden in the light, and which he could have kissed devoutly. At ten o'clock he took leave of the marchioness, pressed Claire's hand fraternally, and went out into the gay world to dance till morning.

When summer time came, the family took flight into Normandy to an estate belonging to the marchioness, for, faithful to her husband's prejudice, they had not returned to Beaulieu. Here Gaston was perfectly happy, scouring the woods on horseback with Octave and Claire, exhilarated by the pure air, while the marchioness employed her time examining the family archives to discover new papers relating to the English suit.

The question was of a large sum bequeathed by will to the marquis which the English heirs had contested, and the solicitors for the two parties had entered the case like rats in a cheese, making profit for themselves by prolonging hostilities. The suit, begun by the marquis from self-love, had been continued by his widow from self-interest, for the Marquis de Beaulieu's fortune had been seriously impaired by his follies, and the English estate represented the most

available portion of the patrimony of the two children. The property of the marchioness, though it was handsome, answered only their common needs. Mme. de Beaulieu entertained no doubt of the issue of the contest, and Claire, it was believed, would bring a dowry of two millions to the man who should be fortunate enough to please her.

Meanwhile the duke was appointed secretary to the embassy at St. Petersburg, and the marriage was arranged to take place during his first leave of absence. It happened at the end of six months. The duke came to Paris, but for a week only, charged with a mission which his embassador was unwilling to trust to the hazard of writing.

A week! Could any one marry in a week? There was not even time for the bans to be regularly published. The duke's manner was tender, but there was a shade of levity which contrasted with his former earnestness.

During his absence, Gaston had frequented Russian society, the most corrupt in the world, and had brought back certain ideas of his own on the subject of love. The expression of his face even had changed; his features had grown harder, and traces of dissipation were visible on his formerly pure brow. Claire did not, or would not, see these changes in the man to whom she had pledged her troth. She trusted him, and waited. His letters became less frequent, though filled always with passionate protestations. He suffered cruelly at the postponement of his happiness, but he said nothing of his return, and two years had now elapsed.

Mme. de Beaulieu's salons had been closed during these two winters at the request of Claire, who wished to rid herself thus of suitors who would not be discouraged. Octave continued his law studies, while Mme. de Beaulieu was buried deeper and deeper in the papers relating to her interminable suit.

When the spring came, a caprice seized Claire to visit the estate of Beaulieu, which her father had placed under interdict during his life, and the marchioness, incapable of denying her daughter, and wishing also to divert her mind, consented. And so it came about that on a beautiful October day the young marquis, who had just taken his degree, had been encountered with his gun on his shoulder, and accompanied by his faithful spaniel in M. Derblay's woods.

CHAPTER II.

While the young marquis was returning heavily laden to the château, Mme. de Beaulieu and Claire were seated in the large salon enjoying the close of the beautiful summer's day. Through the large glass doors opening on the flight of steps, the sunshine streamed in floods, lighting up the burnished gold frames from which looked out ancestors in ceremonial dress, smiling or grave. A low, broad screen in Genoa velvet encircled the easy-chair where sat the marchioness, busily engaged in knitting hoods for the village children.

Mme. de Beaulieu had passed her fortieth year. Her grave, gentle face was crowned with hair that, already nearly white, imparted to her an air of nobility; her dark, melancholy eyes seemed still

moist with secret tears. She was fragile and delicate, and though the day was warm, had taken the precaution to spread over her knees a large shawl to protect the little feet on which, with a persistent coquetry she still wore thin black satin slippers.

Buried in a large arm-chair, with her head leaning on its tapestried back, and hands hanging idly by her side, Claire's eyes were riveted on the horizon before her, but she did not see it. For an hour she had sat there motionless and silent, with the sunshine lighting up her hair with an aureola like the halo around the Virgin. For some minutes past her mother had been observing her anxiously. To rouse her attention she moved the basket containing the balls of worsted, accompanying the movement with a significant "hem! hem!" But insensible to these indirect appeals, Claire still sat lost in thought. The marchioness, vexed, laid aside her work, and raising herself in her chair said in a somewhat chiding tone:

"Claire!"

Mlle. de Beaulieu closed her eyes as if to bid adieu to her dream, and without a movement of her head, merely raising her beautiful white hands to the arms of her chair:

"Well, mother?" she replied.

"What are you thinking about?"

Claire's brow clouded, and for a moment she made no reply. Then with an effort over herself she said, quietly:

"Of nothing. The warm day stupefied me. Why did you call me?"

"To try to rouse you from your reverie and induce you to speak to me," said the marchioness, with a shade of affectionate reproach in her voice.

There was a pause. Claire had resumed her listless attitude; the marchioness bent forward and threw aside her shawl, regardless of the fresh air. Mlle. de Beaulieu turned toward her a sad, beautiful face.

"How long is it since we have heard from St. Petersburg?" she asked as though putting her thoughts in words.

"About two months."

"Two months, yes!" repeated Claire with a sigh.

The marchioness lost patience. "Why will you torment yourself with such thoughts?"

"What would you have me think of it not of my betrothed? and how can I help tormenting myself, as you say, to divine the cause of his absence?"

"It is unaccountable, it must be confessed," said the marchioness, "he promised to return this winter—first political complications detained him, then, the winter being ended, he would wait for summer. Summer has come, but not the duke; here is autumn, and Gaston ceases even to invent pretexts for his absence. Admitting that it is simply negligence, it is unpardonable. The times are degenerate, the men of our rank have even forgotten to be polite."

And the marchioness raised her white head which made her look so like the powdered ladies that smiled from their handsome frames around the wall.

"But if he should be ill?" ventured Claire with an impulse to defend the man she loved, "if he should have been unable to write."

"It is inadmissible," replied the marchioness pitilessly, "the embassy would have notified us. Rest assured he is perfectly well and gay, and has been leading the cotillon in fashionable Russian society all winter."

Claire's face contracted painfully. She turned pale as if all the blood in her veins had rushed to her heart. Then forcing a smile:

"He promised to pass the winter in Paris, and I had drawn delightful pictures to myself of triumphing in his success, while he too might have perceived mine. It must be owned that he is free from jealousy, though there might be thought to be some cause for it. Even here in this desert of Beaulieu, there is this iron-master, who last Sunday at mass—you were too pious to remark it—but I was reading my prayers when, without knowing why, I felt embarrassed. Something stronger than my will drew my attention. I turned and saw Monsieur Derblay in the shadow of an altar."

"He was praying."

"No, he was looking at me. Our eyes met, and he seemed to be making to me a silent entreaty. I dropped my head resolving not to turn again in that direction. When I left the church he was waiting in the porch. He did not venture to offer me the holy-water, but bowed profoundly, and when we passed out, I felt his gaze following me. It seems it was the first time he has been seen at mass this year."

"Ah well, that will count something toward the safety of his soul. But instead of rolling his eyes at you he had better be trying to make reparations to us for his encroachments—and you must be sadly at a loss to be occupying yourself with the sighs of this iron-beater, who will deafen us one of these days with his hammers."

"Monsieur Derblay's homage was respectful; I have no cause to complain of it. I only spoke of the iron-master among others. The heart of woman is inconstant, they say; the duke is not here to defend his own, and I might weary of this rôle of Penelope. Gaston ought to say this much to himself, but he does not, while I remain here—patient, faithful—"

"And you are wrong," exclaimed the marchioness with vivacity, "were I in your place—"

"No, mother," interrupted Mlle. de Beaulieu with gravity, "I am not wrong, for I love the Duke de Bligny."

"You love him!" said the marchioness with ill-concealed irritation, "how you exaggerate! Gaston and you have grown up together, and you thought this life in common must never end, that you could not be happy without him, foolish child that you are! You are deceived in the duke; he is light, frivolous; he has habits of independence that are incorrigible, and I foresee disappointment for you. I could not see you married to him without grave concern."

Claire's face flushed, and they looked at each other in silence. Then Mlle. de Beaulieu said, in a voice that quivered:

"Mother, you have never spoken so before. Is there a cause for the duke's absence which you have been hiding from me? Have you learned anything?"

Mme. de Beaulieu was frightened at the vehemence of her daughter's emotion. She perceived for the first time the depth and reality of her attachment, and recognized that she had gone too far.

"No, my child, I know nothing; I have heard nothing," she said; "my nephew's prolonged silence astonishes me, that is all; indeed I think he is much too deeply engrossed in diplomacy."

Claire was reassured. Her mother's spirited attack proceeded simply from a dissatisfaction which she could not but acknowledge to be well grounded; and recovering her serenity:

"A little more patience, mother," she said. "The duke thinks of us, I am sure, and will surprise us one of these days by arriving unexpectedly."

"I hope so, since you wish it. At all events, my nephew De Préfont and his wife will be here to-day from Paris, and they, perhaps, will be better informed than we are."

"Here comes Octave through the terrace with Maître Bachelin," said Mlle. de Beaulieu, rising quickly, anxious to escape from a painful conversation.

She quitted the salon and went out into the bright sunlight. She was twenty-two, and in the full splendor of womanly beauty, with a tall, elegant figure and superb shoulders, ending in hands befitting a queen.

Her coil of golden hair, knotted high, revealed a neck of rosy whiteness. As she leaned lightly forward, resting her hands on the iron balustrade while she mechanically stripped the leaves from one of its twining plants, she was the impersonation of the grace and vigor of youth. Mme. de Beaulieu's eyes rested on her in admiration, then she shook her head and heaved a sigh.

The steps of the new-comers sounded distinctly on the terrace, and a confused noise of voices reached the salon.

Maître Bachelin was a little man of about sixty: with a rotund figure, a red, scrupulously shaven face, white hair, and dressed in black with a suspicion of ruffles on his wrists, he was a type of the notary of the old régime. He was warmly attached to his noble clients, saying "Madame the Marchioness" with pious unction, and sustaining the interests of the Beaulieu family by hereditary right, for the Bachelins were, by birth, notaries to the aristocracy of the country. The last of these public functionaries preserved with pride some charters of the time of Louis XI. with the rough feudal signature of the Marquis Honoré Onfroy, Jacques Octave, and the flourishing autograph of Maître Joseph Antoine Bachelin, royal notary.

The return of the Beaulieu family to the château had been an occasion of great joy to the good man. He had grieved at the absence of his noble clients, and begun to indulge a hope that every summer would now see them at Beaulieu. Jealous of his skill, he offered his aid to assist in disentangling the perplexed threads of the English suit, and had in a month and a half done more work than had been done by all the solicitors of the Beaulieu family in two years. The marchioness was delighted to have secured his services in spite of his gloomy prognostications as to the probable result of the contest, and recognizing in him one of these devoted servants who are entitled to be raised to the rank of friends, treated him accordingly.

Maître Bachelin had, on his way to the château, encountered the young marquis at the park gate, and insisting on relieving him of a part of his burden, had taken from him his gun, which he carried on his left arm, while he hugged closely with his right a voluminous leather case stuffed with papers.

"Ah! you have more there than you can carry, my poor Monsieur Bachelin," said Claire to the notary, who was ascending the stairs with precipitation, trying to take off his hat and going through the motions of ceremonious bowing.

"Accept my humble respects, mademoiselle. I represent in my person, as you see, the attributes of law and of force, with the code in one hand and gun in the other. But the gun is in the left—*cedant arma togæ!* A thousand pardons; you do not perhaps understand Latin, and I am simply a pedant."

"My sister understands that Latin at least," said the marquis laughing, "and you are the best of men. Let me take my gun from you, and thanks."

And resuming his weapon, he followed the notary up the stairs.

"You have had a fine hunt it appears," said Mlle. de Beaulieu, stopping her brother at the door and lifting the game-bag which hung from his shoulder.

"I shall be modest, and not deck myself in false plumes; the game was not killed by me."

"By whom then?"

"I do not know." And seeing his sister's surprise: "Only think, I strayed into the Pont-Avesnes grounds where I met another huntsman, who inquired quite sharply who I was, but no sooner did he hear my name than he became conciliatory, even gracious, and forced upon me the contents of this bag."

"What was the huntsman like?" asked Bachelin.

"A tall dark young man in an old gray felt and blouse."

"Ah! exactly," said the notary in an undertone; "I think I can enlighten you, Monsieur the Marquis, concerning your mysterious donor. It was Monsieur Derblay."

"Monsieur Derblay! With a peasant's blouse and slouch hat like a smuggler's?"

"Bear in mind, Monsieur the Marquis, that we are rustic sportsmen. I, whom you see ordinarily decently clad, might frighten you if you encountered me in a corner of the woods in my hunting-dress. If I had not recognized Monsieur Derblay from your portrait, his courtesies would leave me no room for doubt."

"Indeed! Then I have been courteous enough to tell him he was a very disagreeable neighbor. I must go to see him and apologize."

"I think that is unnecessary, Monsieur the Marquis. If you will announce my visit to your mother, I will inform you, in her presence, of certain facts that may serve to modify your opinion of Monsieur Derblay."

"Ma foi! I should like nothing better. He seems to be an excellent fellow," said Octave, as he removed his hunting gear. He entered the salon and kissing Mme. de Beaulieu's hand respectfully, said:

"Maître Bachelin wishes to see you, mother."

"Why does he not come in?" said the marchioness. "I have heard you prattling on the stairs for ten minutes. Good-morning, Monsieur Bachelin," and as the notary was engaged in bowing as low as his corpulent person would permit, "do you bring me good news?" she added.

Bachelin's smiling face assumed an expression of seriousness.

"I bring news, yes, Madame the Marchioness." And as if in haste to change the subject. "I went this morning to Pont-Avesnes, and have seen Monsieur Derblay. The difficulties respecting your boundary lines are removed. My friend is ready to accept whatever conditions you may dictate."

"In that case," said Mme. de Beaulieu, with some embarrassment, "we have no conditions to dictate. The matter will be submitted to your arbitrament; whatever you do will be well done."

"That is a resolution that gives me much pleasure. I am very desirous to see peace between the manufactory and the château. All we want is to sign the preliminaries, for which purpose Monsieur Derblay will present himself at the chateau with his sister, Mademoiselle Suzanne, and offer his respects, if Madame the Marchioness will permit it."

"Certainly, let him come. I am curious to see this Cyclops that blackens all the valley. But, I suppose it is not this treaty of peace only that swells your portfolio," she added, pointing to the notary's leather case. "You bring new papers relative to the English suit, do you not?"

"Yes, Madame the Marchioness, with your permission we will talk business."

He glanced toward the son and daughter. The marchioness understood, and experienced a vague uneasiness. What had her man of business to say to her that must be said with closed doors?

"Octave," she said, turning to her son, "see if the order has been given to meet your cousins at the station at five."

Claire looked up quickly. The meaning of the marchioness was evident, and the brother and sister withdrew, with a smile to their mother. The thought had suddenly presented itself to Mlle. de Beaulieu that Bachelin brought news of the duke, and deeply agitated, conscious only of a confused tumult of ideas and feelings surging through her brain, while she was unable to fix one, she sauntered down the terrace and beneath the shades of the great trees.

When the marchioness and the notary were left alone, the smiling expression which Bachelin had assumed gave place to a look of thoughtful gravity. Mme. de Beaulieu remained silent for a moment, as though unwilling to part with her quiet of mind until the last moment.

"Well, my dear Bachelin," she said, after a pause, "what news do you bring me?"

The notary shook his white head sadly.

"Nothing good, Madame the Marchioness. The winning of the late marquis' suit has become a matter of grave doubt."

"You are not telling me the whole truth, Bachelin; you would not have this dejected air if there were the least ray of hope. Have the English courts decided? have we lost?"

The notary could not summon courage to reply, but he made a

significant gesture. The marchioness bit her lips, tears gathered in her eyes, while Bachelin, forgetting himself, began pacing the room with hasty strides, gesticulating as though he had been studying an affair of business in his own cabinet.

"The case was mismanaged! These attorneys are fools, and rapacious! They write you a letter, so much—they read your reply, so much— If the marquis had applied to me for counsel—but he was in Paris. And he was ill advised by his attorneys—idiots, these Paris attorneys!"

He paused suddenly, and striking his hands together: "A sad blow this for the house of Beaulieu."

"Terrible!" said the marchioness, "it is the ruin of my son and daughter. It would take not less than ten years of economy to re-establish our finances."

Bachelin had recovered his composure, and now stood in an attentive attitude. The loss of the suit he knew to be irreparable. The carelessness of the marquis had given advantages to his opponents, and no appeal was possible.

"Misfortune seldom comes singly," resumed the marchioness. "You have other news for me, Bachelin; tell me all; what remains cannot be worse than this."

"What remains appears to me less serious, Madame the Marchioness, but I fear that of the two misfortunes the loss of the money will affect you least seriously."

"You have tidings of the Duke de Bligny?" said the marchioness, turning pale.

"You charged me with inquiries respecting your nephew," said this fervent adorer of the aristocracy, with a shade of disdain. "I have followed your instructions and here is what I have learned. The Duke de Bligny has been in Paris for six weeks."

"Six weeks!" repeated the marchioness, confounded, "and we have remained ignorant of it!"

"Your nephew has taken care that you should not know it."

"And he does not come, knowing our reverse? For he knows it, does he not?"

"He was among the first to hear of it."

Mme. de Beaulieu made a gesture of grieved surprise.

"Ah! you are right, Bachelin, this is a more cruel blow than the loss of the money. The duke abandons us; he has not come and I feel a presentiment that he will not. What he wanted was our money, and the fortune gone, the lover vanishes. Money is the watchword of this venial, grasping epoch. Beauty, virtue, intelligence, count for nothing. Now that we are almost poor no one will recognize us."

Bachelin had listened calmly to this outburst of the outraged mother, unable to disguise a secret satisfaction. His face became very red, and mechanically he rubbed his hands behind his back.

"I think you are unjust to our epoch, Madame the Marchioness; practical ideas govern it, it is true, and the natural cupidity of the human race has made notable progress; but we must not condemn all our contemporaries in one breath. There are men left who are disinterested enough to prize a woman for her beauty, virtue and

intelligence. I do not say that I know many, but I know, at least, one."

"What do you mean?" asked the marchioness.

"Simply that among my friends there is one who has not been able to see Mademoiselle de Beaulieu without being ardently in love with her. Knowing her engagement to the duke, he has remained silent; but now that she is free, if you authorize it, he will speak."

"You allude to Monsieur Derblay?"

"Yes, Madame the Marchioness," said the notary, boldly.

"I was not ignorant of the sentiments with which my daughter has inspired the iron-master," resumed the marchioness. "He shows them only too plainly."

"Ah! because he loves Mademoiselle Claire and that sincerely," resumed the notary, earnestly, "but you do not as yet know enough of Monsieur Derblay to understand his worth."

"I am aware that he is highly esteemed throughout the country. But are you, my dear Bachelin, connected with his family?"

"I was their father's friend, and have know Monsieur Philippe and his sister from their birth. My client has in my eyes but a single defect—that he spells his name in one word without an apostrophe. But the family is an old one, and who knows? In the Revolution honest men pressed close together, letters may have done so too."

"Let him keep his name as it is," said the marchioness, sadly, "he makes it honorable, and in these days that is enough. See the Duke de Bligny, who deserts Claire when her fortune is gone, whilst Monsieur Derblay seeks out a dowerless girl, and tell me which is the nobleman, the lord or the plebeian?"

"Monsieur Derblay would be most happy, madame, to hear you speak so."

"Do not repeat what I have said," interrupted the marchioness, gravely. "Mademoiselle de Beaulieu accepts no one's generosity, and knowing her as I do, I think it probable she will never marry. Pray Heaven that this double blow may find her strong and resigned."

"Whatever happens, madame, remember that Monsieur Derblay would esteem himself the happiest of men were it permitted him to hope. He will wait, for he is not a man whose heart will change. Now if I may offer a word of advice, say nothing to Mademoiselle de Beaulieu. The Duke de Bligny may come to himself, and there is time enough to make her suffer."

"You are right. As for my son, I must acquaint him with our misfortune."

The marchioness opened the door and beckoned to Octave, who was seated on the terrace, patiently awaiting the close of the conference.

"Well," he said, gayly, "is the meeting adjourned, or am I called to take part in it?"

"I have serious and distressing news for you," said the marchioness, gently.

"What is it?" he inquired, becoming immediately grave.

"Monsieur Bachelin has received definite news from our representative in England."

"Well," he said, "and the cause is lost?"

"You knew it, then?" said the marchioness, breathing more freely on seeing her son's composure.

"Not positively, but I have anticipated it. Though I have refrained from discouraging you, I have been satisfied that our case was indefensible. I have dreaded it on account of my sister, whose dowry was at stake, but there is a very simple method of settling that. You will give her the share of your fortune that you had reserved for me. I will take care of myself."

Mme. de Beaulieu flushed with pride as she turned to the notary:

"What right have I to complain with such a son?"

"There is no merit in it," said the marquis, with emotion. "I love my sister and would do anything to insure her happiness. And while we are on these melancholy topics, do you not think there is some connection between our cousin's silence and this lost suit?"

"You mistake, my dear boy," said the marchioness, hastily, with a deprecating gesture, "the Duke de Bligny—"

"Oh! you need have no fears," interrupted Octave, with haughty disdain. "If Gaston shrinks from keeping his engagement now that Mademoiselle de Beaulieu is not presented to him with a million in each hand, we are not the ones, I believe, to seize him by the collar and force him to respect his word. And if the Duke de Bligny does not marry my sister it will be in my opinion so much the worse for him, and so much the better for her."

"Well said, my son," exclaimed the marchioness.

"Well said," echoed Bachelin, "and if Mademoiselle de Beaulieu is not rich enough to tempt a fortune-hunter, she is quite capable of winning a man who has heart."

The marchioness made a motion of silence to Bachelin, and the latter, happy to see so favorably terminated a much-dreaded interview, made his adieus to his noble clients, and with all the speed of his old limbs, took the route to Pont-Avesnes.

CHAPTER III.

It was, as Bachelin had affirmed, M. Derblay, whom the Marquis de Beaulieu had encountered in the forest of Pont-Avesnes. Leaving Octave to call after him, he had hastened across the woods, heedless of the lashing of branches or the tearing of thorns. He descended the slope with long strides, unconscious that he walked so fast as to cause the drops to stand on his brow. When the marquis should discover who he was—for he would end by discovering—he would be gratified by the courtesies of his disagreeable neighbor, and who could tell? an acquaintance might be the result. He would see the adorable Claire, he would speak to her. But at this thought a cloud passed before him. He fancied the words would suffocate him, and that he would stand before her silent and abashed. Then he would seek refuge in some obscure corner of the room where he might see her at his ease, and lose himself in the happiness of this contemplation.

Happiness! And why? Where could this insane idolatry lead except to witnessing more nearly her marriage with the Duke de Bligny? For that he would return was certain. How could a man

loved by such a woman be mad enough to disdain her? And if not the duke, it would be some other brilliant nobleman who had but to present his name to be cordially welcomed, while he, the plebeian, would be repulsed with cold disdain.

He no longer ran toward Pont-Avesnes like a deer through the coppice, but walked slowly, mechanically plucking the leaves from their branches and crumpling them in his fingers. Then he paused, and leaning against the trunk of a tree, stood there, grave and pale. He passed his life in review, asking himself whether the work he had accomplished did not give him the right to be happy. After a brililant college career and a successful course at the Polytechnic school, he had chosen the engineering business, and had just received his appointment, when war being declared, he had enlisted as a volunteer in the army of the Rhine. He had participated in the bloody reverse of Froeschwiller, and returned with the remains of the first army corps to the camp at Chalons. He had made the northern campaign with General Faideherbe, and, wounded at Saint Quentin, had passed six weeks in a hospital hovering between life and death, and had awakened from a long stupor to learn with a shudder that Paris was in the hands of the Commune.

His state of convalescence saved him the sad duty of firing on the French, and he returned to his home, suffering from the effects of his wound, but bringing with him the cross of the Legion of Honor. A misfortune, greater than any he had yet experienced, awaited him there. He found his household mourning the loss of his mother, and his little sister deprived of her care at the age of seven. M. Derblay, engrossed in business affairs which demanded his constant attention, had been forced to abandon the little Suzanne to the care of servants, and deprived of the tenderness and affection which is more than material comfort in the life of children and of women, she clung to Philippe with passionate devotion.

But it became necessary to part with Suzanne in order to resume his occupations. This separation, so grievous for the child, was not, however, destined to prove of long duration. M. Derblay suddenly sunk under the burden of his excessive cares, and Philippe and Suzanne were left alone in the world.

New duties now devolved upon the young man. The winding up of his father's affairs proved extremely complicated, and occasioned him many a painful surprise. M. Derblay, though a man of intelligence, had the serious defect of undertaking more than he could accomplish; expending his energies in a variety of directions and unable to bring all to a successful issue, the losses of one enterprise absorbed the profits of another. He had surmounted, by dint of energy and skill, the host of difficulties with which he was constantly met, and had passed away before the catastrophe came, but leaving behind him the most entangled of inheritances.

A splendid career was traced out for Philippe. He might abandon for it his father's enterprises, permitting all his resources to be applied to the saving of his name, but this would leave his sister penniless, and without hesitation he renounced his future, resigned this position, and assumed the burden under which his father had succumbed.

A difficult task lay before him. M. Derblay's inheritance com-

prised glass works at Courtalin, a foundry in the Nivernais, slate-works in the Var, and iron works at Pont-Avesnes. Philippe applied himself to gathering together the scattered wrecks, and for six years his days, and a great portion of his nights, were dedicated to the work of rescue so courageously entered upon. All the ready money he could command was appropriated to setting matters to rights, and as he saw each enterprise in successful working-order he abandoned it, retaining only the forges whose great value he recognized.

In seven years he had settled up his father's estate, and now reserved only the foundry of the Nivernais, which he worked in conjunction with the factory at Pont-Avesnes. He was now master of his business, and in a position to enlarge it extensively. Idolized as he was throughout the country, might he not become a candidate for deputy? Would not this be a distinction to please a woman's vanity? And were not the pursuits of industry themselves a power in this century of money?

And little by little hope revived. Resuming his walk, he soon emerged from the woods. To his right was the meadow, covering the valley; to his left, the first layers of pierced rock at the foot of the hill, from which a little railway conveyed the ore directly to the manufactory.

Roused suddenly from his meditations, the idea presented itself to him to glance at the works, and he took the road leading from the mine. Upon a small hillock stood a shelter appropriated to the foreman in charge. As he approached, he seemed to hear cries, and to observe an unusual stir at the entrance to the tunnel. The iron-master quickened his pace, and in a few minutes was in a position to investigate for himself the cause of the disturbance.

A landslide, occasioned by infiltrations of water, had taken place on the railroad, the cars had been overturned, and at the foot of the embankment the conductor of the train—a boy of fifteen—had been buried beneath a heap of sand and sunken timber. A few workmen and a number of managers arriving post-haste from the village were gathered together in animated talk, and in the midst of them a woman was gesticulating wildly. Philippe made his way into the group.

"What is the matter?" he inquired, anxiously.

"Ah! Monsieur Derblay," said the woman, redoubling her cries at sight of the iron-master, "it is my poor boy, my little Jacques, who has been buried down there for three quarters of an hour."

"And what has been done toward getting him out?" asked Philippe quickly, looking around on the miners.

"We have cleared away the rubbish as well as we could, patron," said the chief of the squad, pointing to a large excavation, "but we are afraid to touch the timber any more. A false move might make it fall and crush the boy to atoms."

"We heard him speak ten minutes ago," cried the distracted mother, "and now there is not a sound. My poor boy, and they are going to leave you there!"

And breaking forth into sobs the unhappy woman rolled over on the grass.

Handing his gun to one of the bystanders, M. Derblay threw him-

self full length on the ground, and with his head at the opening, below the intersecting timbers, listened. There was profound silence in the tomb of sand where the boy lay.

"Jacques!" he cried, his voice sounding hollow beneath the vault of wood and earth. "Jacques, do you hear me?"

A groan was the answer, and in another instant the words reached his ear, feebly and at intervals:

"Ah, patron, it is you! Ah! mon Dieu! if it is you I am saved!"

This simple confidence touched Philippe, and he resolved to try the impossible to save him.

"Can you move?" he asked.

"No," murmured the boy, "and I believe my leg is broken."

"Don't be afraid my boy, we will get you out;" and rising, "Take the props," he said to the workmen, "and raise the timber," pointing to a long beam forming a lever under the ruins.

"It can't be done, patron," resumed the foreman, "everything would fall. There is only one way, for three or four men to creep through the hole we have made and try to extricate the boy, who can't move—while the others lift the timber with the screw-jack. It is a risk, there are chances of not getting out again."

"No matter, it must be done," said the iron-master resolutely, looking around on the workmen. As all were silent and motionless, his face flushed.

"If one of you were down there, what would he think of his comrades if they should leave him to his fate? Since no one will venture, I will go myself."

And bending his tall person, Philippe crept under the ruins. A cry of admiration and gratitude was raised by the crowd; and as if his example was all that was needed to give these men their courage, three others entered after the iron-master, while the rest, uniting their strength, with superhuman exertions raised and supported the timbers.

There was silence, in which nothing could be heard but the sobs of the mother and the deep breathing of the rescuers bending beneath the upheld weight. A few minutes like centuries passed, in which the lives of five men hung in the balance, then a shout of joy was raised. Covered with earth and with hands and shoulders torn the four men emerged, the last of whom—Philippe—bore in his arms the fainting boy.

Then a tremendous crash resounded as the timbers fell again into the trench. The mother divided her demonstrations of joy between the iron-master and the child, while the crowd, deeply moved, gathered round the savior and the saved.

"Come, carry the boy home, and go for the doctor," said M. Derblay gayly. And arranging his clothes and shouldering his gun he took the route to Pont-Avesnes.

News of the rescue had quickly followed the report of the accident. When he arrived opposite to the gate of the château he saw approaching his sister, accompanied by Bachelin. Suzanne quickened her step in perceiving her brother. She was seventeen, and had a bright young face which wore an expression of innocence and goodness, with a tender artless grace which, without regular beauty,

made her irresistibly charming. As she opened her arms to throw them round her brother's neck:

"Don't touch me!" he exclaimed, "you will ruin your dress. I am covered with mud."

"Do I care for that?" she said, "you have saved the boy. Oh! my Philippe, you are always where a good and noble act is to be done."

And the girl took the brown head in her hands and kissed it fondly. Bachelin, who had not been able to keep pace with her, arrived all out of breath.

"Another good deed to your account," said the notary.

"Do not talk of it," said Philippe, smiling, "it is not worth the trouble. The most serious part of the business is, I believe, the boy is hurt. You had better go on as far as your pharmacy, Suzanne, and if anything is needed, provide it."

"I will, brother. Shall I take Brigitte?"

"Certainly. And now, my dear maître, I must change my dress, for I look like a thief."

Suzanne turned toward the outbuildings of the château, while Philippe and the notary crossed the large court planted with old lindens, in the center of which a rectangular fountain shot upward, its gay jet falling again in fine cascades chased by the wind, and sparkling in the sunshine with iridescent light. This basin was the last remains of the waters that had formerly encircled the château. The Avesnes turned from its course had been diffused through the trenches by the former lords of Pont-Avesnes; but in the reign of Louis XIII. a dam was constructed and the trenches emptied in the river. The mud in their bottom, mingled with a vegetable earth brought there at great expense, is the luxuriant soil in which flourish the fruit-trees which are the marvels of Pont-Avesnes. Peach and pear trees are there a century old, which bear fruit unrivaled in the land. These large trenches, whose walls serve as espaliers, are reservoirs in which the sun stores its rays, warm as a conservatory, and impenetrable to the winter wind.

The château was built on a pile of brown sandstone, which raised it and gave it an imposing appearance. Its large slate roof stood out darkly against the sky. Philippe having confined himself to one wing of the vast cold building, the rest was closed, and but for Brigitte, Suzanne's foster-sister, who in spite of her youth filled with efficiency the post of housekeeper, the château would have been abandoned.

But the active Jura girl, infusing her energy into the three servants under her orders, accomplished twice a month a general cleaning, and preserved in good condition the beautiful Louis Thirteenth furniture of the old reception-rooms. When Brigitte opened the shutters of the grand salon, admitting a flood of light to these spacious apartments, it was as if the curtain of a theater had been suddenly raised, revealing scenery of marvelous splendor. On the walls the most exquisite Gobelin tapestries represented the whole history of Alexander, the Genoa velvet of the great chairs glistened between stately arms of gilded wood; the large Venetian mirrors in their beveled panels reflected the flowers of the parterre, the changing cascade and a little corner of the sky. Brigitte passed actively

along with her feathers and broom, and, the cleaning ended, closed the shutters, and the artistic treasures of the château relapsed into obscurity.

In the inhabited wing Philippe reserved on the first floor a large working cabinet, surrounded with elevated book shelves reached by aid of a ladder on rollers. In the middle was a large table on which papers were piled with a disorder more apparent than real. A handsome bronze inkstand represented two chubby-cheeked Cupids fighting, while the victor laughingly forces a grape into the mouth of the vanquished. On the mantel stood a fine ebony clock mounted with copper, one of Boule's best.

Next to this was the dining-room with its severe furniture of old-fashioned carved wood and rich massive silver that was never used. To make amends there was the little salon furnished in a style the most modern and bourgeois; hangings of blue silk poplin, furniture covered with the same, clock and andirons of rockwork, and a mosaic table on which lay some half-finished embroidery that seemed to await Suzanne's return. In the two large panels were portraits of M. and Mme. Derblay, executed with more conscience than taste by a mediocre Flemish artist.

On the first floor two large chambers communicating by dressing-rooms were those of Philippe and Suzanne, the one grave and somber, furnished in heavy brown velvet and black wood, with only a collection of modern weapons for ornament, in the midst of which might be remarked a canteen pierced by three bullets, a souvenir of Pont-Noyelles. The other, fresh and pure as its occupant, with white muslin hangings over blue stuff knotted with rose-colored ribbon, white lacquered furniture with blue fillets, and all the little trifles that ornament so prettily a young girl's chamber. From her window, which looked on the walks of the park, Suzanne might gaze out and dream, if reverie could overshadow for a moment her gay light-hearted youth.

Philippe conducted Bachelin to his cabinet after parting with Suzanne. He suspected that the notary came from Beaulieu, and like all lovers was impatient to learn the details, important or trivial, which his old friend never failed to bring him of his interviews with the noble occupants of the château. But to-day Bachelin seemed in no mood to talk. He gazed vacantly at the iron-master, who stood before him like a note of interrogation, till he could restrain himself no longer.

"Did you make known my proposition to Madame de Beaulieu?" he asked with assumed calmness.

"Certainly."

"Did she find it satisfactory?"

"Perfectly."

"Did you offer the use of my hunting ground?" he inquired at last, after eying the exasperatingly laconic notary askance for a time.

"What should I have done that for?" asked the notary quietly.

"What for!" exclaimed Philippe.

"Dame!" resumed Bachelin, "did you not make the offer to the marquis yourself this morning, in the most romantic manner?"

Philippe colored a little and dropped his eyes.

"Ah! Monsieur de Beaulieu spoke to you of our interview, but he does not know that it was I whom he met?"

"I have told him. Ought I to have told him also that you filled his game-bag for love of his sister? Ah! ah! are you going to disclaim! Do you not then love Mademoiselle de Beaulieu?"

"But—it is the merest folly," said Philippe, "for a workingman so far removed from the great world to aspire to one so beautiful and proud. I saw her preoccupied and sad, a little anxious perhaps in the absence of her lover, and insensibly I grew to love her. Ah! my friend, I am ashamed of myself, but I cannot conquer the insane passion, which fills me with a new delight, a delicious intoxication, with everything but hope; for there my blind infatuation ends, I give you my word."

"You do not hope—but you love. Then I have not been wrong to speak to the marchioness as I have done?"

"To speak?" stammered Philippe. "To speak—how?"

"As you have spoken yourself, in language as passionate as persuasive."

The iron-master retreated a step, bit his lip violently, and said, in a voice that he tried to render calm:

"I have not desired you, have I, to make such confidences to the marchioness?"

"No," replied Bachelin quietly, "but a favorable opportunity offered, and I took advantage of it. There is nothing, don't you see, like clear understanding. You would have trifled away weeks, perhaps months, getting more and more deeply ensnared. It was much better to speak out at once, even if haughtily repulsed. Do you not admit that my reasons were good?"

Philippe was silent. He had hardly heard Bachelin. A confusion of thoughts whirled through his brain; he had, as it were, lost the consciousness of his existence, and seemed to be carried through space with bewildering rapidity, while the air whizzed in his ears and a voice repeated with a horribly fatiguing persistency: "Claire! if she were to be yours!"

"Why do you gaze at me with that fixed stare?" said Bachelin. "You look like a man in the nightmare?"

Philippe passed his hand over his brow as if to dispel a painful sensation:

"Pardon me. I was disconcerted at the thought that you have taken so serious a step without my knowledge. I have not ceased to regret having been weak enough to confess to you my love for Mademoiselle de Beaulieu; but when one loves, the heart seems too small to contain all its tenderness, and something escapes in spite of itself. I had hardly spoken when my illusions vanished and the pitiless truth returned. Mademoiselle de Beaulieu has never done me the honor to perceive that I exist. She is rich, is betrothed to her cousin, she will be a duchess, and I am a madman to love her. I deserve to be punished, and am prepared to bear it. Tell me all; do not spare me."

"So be it. I will tell you first that Mademoiselle de Beaulieu is no longer rich, that she will in all probability never be a duchess, and that an honest man like yourself never had so good a chance to please her as now."

"Oh, take care; do not encourage me to hope; disappointment would be too cruel."

"I do bid you hope," replied Bachelin, "and in doing so I betray to you the secrets of the Beaulieu family. But you have too much interest in being prudent to repeat what I have said. Mademoiselle de Beaulieu is ruined by the loss of the English suit, but she does not know it. The Duke de Bligny has been in Paris for six weeks, and neglects her. She does not know that either. When Mademoiselle Claire knows that she is abandoned, there will be a fearful tempest in her heart, and those who are near her may gather up the wreck."

"Ruined and abandoned!" cried Philippe, "how can it be? What need has she of fortune, and what treasure could one ask for but herself?"

"It is under this very aspect of disinterestedness that I have shown you to them."

"Oh! tell them so, tell them so, I implore you. But no," he added after a pause, "say nothing. Mademoiselle de Beaulieu is proud, and the idea of owing an obligation to the man she is to marry would create a barrier between us. I would receive her hand on my knees, but I wish her to believe herself rich that she may be free to accept or refuse me freely. And should I sign over to her all I possess, I would still be the favored one."

"There, there!" said Bachelin, "you are traveling too fast. What a fine thing is youth and passion! But you must move at a more reasonable rate; the only question at present is that of presenting you at the château, so that you may enjoy the satisfaction of contemplating the object of your desires, as they said in the last century. Be grave and calm. Conduct yourself discreetly, and take your sister with you. She will act as a screen for you, they will occupy themselves with her, and meanwhile you will compose yourself."

"And when shall I go to Beaulieu?" asked Philippe in agitation.

"Ah! are you frightened already before you have even set out? Well, say to-morrow. A night's rest will restore your self-possession, so that you may make the most of your opportunities and advantages."

And rising slowly, the notary took his leather case under his arm and moved toward the door. Pausing midway:

"Do you still regret that I spoke to Madame de Beaulieu?" he inquired. "In your agitation you have not even asked what her reply was."

"True!" exclaimed Philippe, and his joy changing suddenly to uneasiness. "What did she say?" he inquired.

"What was natural in such a case—that she should not constrain Mademoiselle Claire—with the usual commonplaces. Let me tell you that the strength of the position you have to force is not on the mother's side, but on the daughter's. Which said, I am off to dinner."

And after affectionately pressing the iron-master's hand, Bachelin took his departure.

Philippe remained alone absorbed in profound meditation. Looking calmly at his situation it did not appear desperate. Mlle. de

Beaulieu, unworthily betrayed by her lover, must remain a few months at least in the Juras to allow time to elapse after her humiliating disappointment; he might see her, and with delicate and assiduous attentions might come to be not unpleasing to her. Suzanne would prove a useful ally. She would become Claire's companion, would win her with her artless tenderness, and little by little the thought of the brother would enter Mlle. de Beaulieu's heart.

And the dream began to wear the appearance of reality. He saw the two girls walking side by side in the shades of Pont-Avesnes, one tall and proud, the other gentle and graceful; he felt the intoxication of faint delicious perfumes, he was about to touch them when suddenly a fresh mouth on his forehead roused him from his reverie, and Suzanne's voice murmured in his ear:

"What are you thinking about, Philippe?"

As the iron-master remained silent and motionless looking at her with a vague smile, she continued:

"You will not tell me. Shall I tell you then? I would wager you are thinking of a beautiful blonde young lady."

"What do you mean?" he began. But the girl's mischievous glance disconcerted him. He stood before her in stupefaction, wondering by what strange sagacity she had penetrated his secret.

"You are agitated," she resumed, tenderly. "You thought your secret was safe, but you have not been yourself for a month past, and it needed no great discernment to discover that I no longer possessed your whole heart. Oh! I am not jealous, I love you too well, my Philippe, I who am not your sister only but your child. Love and be loved! for there is no happiness that can equal your deserts."

Tears moistened the eyes of the iron-master. His sister's tenderness had relaxed his overwrought nerves. He leaned on the tall chimney-piece looking down at her while she smiled up at him.

"Now you are weeping," said Suzanne, "it is sad then to love?"

"Let us talk no more of such folly," he said.

"Folly! and why? What woman could know you without wanting to please you? I will go to her myself and say: 'Mademoiselle, you are wrong not to adore my brother; there is not a man in all the world to whom he is not absolutely superior. I who have known him so long declare it.' And I will be so eloquent that she will come to you herself and say, 'Monsieur, you have so extraordinary a little woman for a sister that I cannot longer refuse to recognize your merit. Will you do me the favor to be my husband?' You will bow with grace and say, 'I could not refuse you, mademoiselle.' I will bless you with a patronizing and solemn air and you will be happy. Ah! you laugh! you are comforted." And taking him by the arm, she added: "In the meantime while awaiting your wedding-day, we will walk in the garden."

CHAPTER IV.

Upon stepping out of the train that had brought him from St. Petersburg to Paris, the Duke de Bligny, fatigued by the journey which he had made without stopping, had himself driven to his club. Having no suite prepared, and his aunt's hôtel being closed,

he found it convenient to take up his quarters in one of the chambers which the large clubs keep at the disposition of guests. His plan was to remain in Paris only a week at furthest, barely allowing time to wind up his affairs with government, and make a few purchases before setting out for Beaulieu.

Nearly a year had elapsed since he had been in France, during which time he had led in the fashionable Russian world the artificial Parisian life which is the foreigner's supreme good, and which resembles the fashionable life of Paris as a Rhine stone resembles a Wisapoor diamond.

The refined corruption of the Slav had, however, taken hold upon him; he had found an enchantment in this intermingling of Asiatic voluptuousness with European activity. The high-born Russian ladies had allured him with their undulating grace and strange indefinable beauty. He wished to penetrate the secret of these smiling Sphinxes with their eyes full of disquiet and claws full of danger. Young, handsome, the bearer of a great name, society had flattered and courted him, and little by little had effaced from his heart the image of his betrothed, like the beautiful pastels of Latour whose colors grow pale with time.

Far from Claire, he at first felt himself an exile and cultivated retirement. But how could he, the youngest attaché of the French embassy, on all sides the object of polite attentions, lead a cloistered life? At the end of a week Gaston could not resist appearing at one of the receptions of his chief, and thus made his entry in Russian society.

On this first evening the duke became the favorite of the aristocracy. His grandfather, an emigré with the Count d'Artois, had lived in intimacy with the Nesselrodes, the Pahleus, and the Gortchakoffs. De Bligny was welcomed with the most flattering distinction by the greatest personages at court, and, presented to the Czar, was treated by him with marked favor. From day to day the position of the young diplomat increased in importance while his superiors were shrewd enough, instead of showing themselves piqued at his success, to seek to turn to advantage the influence acquired by their young subordinate.

But if Gaston was an elegant and accomplished man of the world, he was but a mediocre politician. He plunged into amusement and neglected intrigue; so that it soon came to be understood that, if society had gained a brilliant guest, France had not secured a useful servant. Fluttering, buzzing, flitting from flower to flower, the Duke de Bligny was not the busy bee that produces good honey; but the wasp which ravages while its brilliant corselet glitters in the sunlight. His well-strung nerves bade defiance to the most exhausting fatigue; he could keep his head while supping with the most famous drinkers: and all the world knows how Russians drink. Mme. de Bligny had rightly guessed. The duke was the hero of the winter season. Nothing was done without him, and he might have aspired to the hand of the richest heiress in St. Petersburg.

At the end of six months he began to weary of the existence he led and found excitement only in play. Upon his first game of cards he had recognized in himself the born gamester. He played with the insolent luck of one who had entered the world as con-

queror. And morning after morning he returned home, laden with the spoils of his adversaries, with his brow clasped as it were in an iron vise, and retired when day broke—the dark gloomy day of Russian winter which resembles twilight. About four o'clock he rose, and with the lighting of the city gas his day began. For nearly two years he hardly saw the sunlight. His once pleasing features had hardened; they were still handsome, but the freshness of youth had been replaced by the mask of the *viveur*. His wavy brown hair began to grow gray on the temples, his blue eye was deep and sunken. The traces of the feverish life he led grew gaily more visible.

His aunt would no longer have recognized in him the bashful, gentle-voiced youth whom Claire laughingly called "Mademoiselle Gaston," who was content to pass his evenings in their quiet salon. He was a man, and one of the most dangerous among men, believing nothing, considering nothing outside of his own good pleasure. The paternal blood calmed by years of unruffled repose began to boil in his veins, and the race of De Bligny—which since Henry III. had furnished the court of France its most voluptuous favorites, its most refined gallants and roués—had in him a fitting representative.

There was the vigor of a giant in the young man's delicate frame. These soft languishing lords who painted their faces and hands, who called on their pages rather than stoop to pick up their *bel-bouquet*, and were carried in a litter to avoid the fatigue of horses, in battle charged like madmen with a hundred pounds' weight on their persons. Gaston would not have gone a kilometer on foot for any useful purpose, but was capable of hunting all day or fencing for hours without weariness.

It was in gaming, however, that he exhibited the full extent of his powers. He seemed to compel luck by the force of his will, and won with an unheard-of persistency. The worst hands became good ones when he took them. The bank, unlucky when he played against it, became impregnable when he held the cards. For two years he continued to be the spoiled child of fortune; they called him "Gaston the Lucky," and he escaped suspicion only because of his well-known honesty.

The remains of his patrimony, thus augmented by his winnings placed him in a position to live on a grand scale. He kept superb horses, splendid lodgings, and indulged in all the luxuries pertaining to a man of fashion. After the performance at the Théâtre Français, or upon quitting the house where his evening had been passed, he was driven in a sleigh the length of the Perspective. Muffled closely in fur robes, he loved to feel the cold night wind on his face and with nerves braced, entered upon his game about two in the morning, winning an easy victory from his already excited opponents.

Seated at the table beneath the burning light of the lusters, he played always with an impassability which neither gain nor loss could move. In the memory of the oldest gamesters such a bearing had been unknown. He treated with silent disdain the puerile superstitions he witnessed in those around him, trusting to himself alone and shrugging his shoulders at the fetishes.

In society he had a number of intrigues, though his was not a

passionate nature; he was too profoundly selfish to love. Once only he conceived himself in love, but the result proved that he flattered himself. The Countess of Woreseff, one of the greatest ladies of the Russian aristocracy, celebrated for her golden hair and her emeralds, became enamored of the duke; he followed her into society, waltzed with her under the enraged eyes of a jealous husband, and well-nigh forgot his cards.

The count devoured his fury, and appeared before his wife with a smiling face. But having obtained information which strengthened his conviction of an intrigue, he resolved to force the duke to fight.

He repaired to the club, and took the bank. The cards being exhausted, upon Gaston having cut, the count refused roundly to continue the game. The duke coldly demanded explanations, the count declined to give them, and a challenge ensued.

The conduct of Woreseff was universally censured, but he had gained his end. The following day the meeting took place in a little birch-wood, firing at twenty paces distance. Gaston, who did not disdain life, showed the husband no generosity.

He fired at the signal, and lodged a ball in his adversary's stomach. The count fell; but raising himself on one knee with infuriate energy, supporting his elbow on the reddened snow, he took aim at Bligny. Weakened, however, by loss of blood, his hand trembled, and the ball reached only the duke's shoulder.

The count survived this terrible wound; and at the end of six weeks Gaston had resumed his former life. But, strange to say, Count Woreseff's ball seemed to have broken the duke's run of luck. Was it that the blood spilled had deranged the happy equilibrium of his faculties? or was Gaston, the favored of fortune, now spurned by her?

From this day he lost uninterruptedly. His superb confidence forsook him, he became familiar with the anxiety of the gamester, who dreads to turn up an unlucky card. He no longer threw down his money with the coolness of a conqueror, he no longer mastered his opponents by his imperturbable self-possession. He turned pale. His unconscious hands made nervous rappings on the edge of the table, and his white teeth were clinched tightly over his lips. When day dawned, he quitted the gaming-table with disheveled hair, cravat untied, and shirt soiled and tumbled by contact with the green cloth.

Step by step he descended from the elevation which he had so proudly mounted. His winnings were swept away with terrifying rapidity. He became embarrassed, and resorted to borrowing—this first symptom of approaching downfall.

He had gloried in the supremacy over this world of *viveurs* to which chance had elevated him, and in an instant his pedestal crumbled beneath him.

Ceasing to win, he ceased to exist for the gamesters, and his appearance among them now passed unnoticed.

Never had his passion for play been so inordinate as in this difficult crisis. He staked with frantic violence and lost or won in a single night enormous sums. He was no longer the skillful horseman who guides his steed, but the terrified rider carried along furiously by the animal which he makes no attempt to master, and who

is more likely to end with broken bones than to reach his goal. And he did not reach it. For him, returns of luck were vain; he could no longer profit by them; but threw away his winnings with the impetuosity of a madman.

His embassador saved him from impending ruin by sending him on a mission to the government at Paris. The duel with Count Woreseff had given rise to unfavorable comments, and it was deemed expedient to remove the duke for a time. He gave him, therefore, a three months' leave of absence. This mission, which the pride of not appearing to succumb in the struggle would not permit him to ask, was accepted by the duke with joy.

There remained to him only some fifty thousand francs, the residue of this gambling purse, which had once been a receptacle of treasure. Amidst the disorders of his life of excess, the memory of Claire had been lost to him.

He began now to think of his betrothed. He saw again in a delicious mirage the quiet peaceful salon of the Beaulieu Hôtel. By the soft lamplight, Claire was bending over her work, her beautiful blonde hair lighted up with golden gleams. She was waiting for him—sighing at his absence, perhaps. His love for her revived, and he made a vow to himself to abandon the feverish existence in which he had known so much of keen delight and of cruel anxiety.

If the remains of his fortune had been squandered, Mlle. de Beaulieu was rich; with her income of a hundred thousand livres a young household might make a good figure. Life in Paris was less dear by far than life in St. Petersburg; and then his time for follies was passed.

They would spend six months, with economy, in the country, appropriating the greater part of their revenue toward the winter season.

The duke suffered his mind to dwell on these thoughts till he felt himself becoming tender and good; he was another man, and he lingered with delight on this return to his youthful dreams. All along the route he caressed charming visions of the future, and when the train stopped at the Northern Railway station, he sprung lightly out to resume with joy possession of the Paris from which his mind and heart had wandered so far.

It was evening. He took a childish delight in gazing from his carriage-window at the long line of the Rue Lafayette, with its countless gas-jets. The stir of the great city seized upon his imagination; there seemed an unaccustomed animation in the movements of passers-by. At the cross street of the Faubourg Montmartre, his progress became embarrassed by a crowd of vehicles; coachmen were calling out in quick tones, and pedestrians hurrying along to avoid the horses. His hack set out, and passing along the great stone wall of the Rothschild Hôtel, turned into the Rue du Helder, and the duke suddenly found himself in the open boulevard.

The sight startled him. Equipages were passing along in file toward the opera house, and in the depths of the capacious landaus appeared women in elegant ball costumes, with heads enveloped in lace scarfs. The intermittent light of the Jabloschkoff threw a pallid brightness over the façade of the theater, and caused the helmets of the municipal horse-guards to glitter and sparkle; the shop-windows blazed out from amid the darkness, and the sidewalks were

black with pedestrians. The magic tableau of Paris at night presented itself to him in all its surpassing splendor.

The hack turned into the Rue de la Paix, and in a few minutes, Gaston was at the door of his club.

He alighted from the carriage somewhat dazed, with ears still full of the noise of the railway, and eyes bewildered with the glare of lights. He was fatigued, and going up to the chamber prepared for him, slept soundly till morning.

Gaston had not been long enough absent from Paris to have forgotten quite his boulevardier habits. He took to the asphalt on foot without delay. His Russian varnish wore off, and he became again the thorough Parisian.

For two days he remained under the influence of the intoxication of Paris; he rode in the Champs and the Bois, sauntered to the Hôtel des Ventes, took the thousand steps between the Madeleine and the Boulevard Montmartre, happy in shaking hands and exchanging bows with old acquaintances. He visited the small theaters, leaned back deliciously in his too hard and too narrow orchestra chair, found the most idiotic plays excellent, experienced, in short, a degree of inward satisfaction which found vent in ceaseless admiration.

Since quitting Russia, he had been, in fact, like an escaped convict. His business with government was terminated in a few days, and he decided to leave Paris at the end of the week. He wished to surprise Claire and the marchioness, enjoyed their astonishment in anticipation, and would not for an empire have foregone the satisfaction of arriving unexpectedly.

In sauntering along the Rue de la Paix, he made a visit to Basset, the family jeweler, and purchased a handsome engagement ring, a large sapphire, encircled with brilliants and beautifully mounted. He saw himself in the act of presenting to Claire the emblazoned white velvet case, he saw her open it, and with a grave, gentle smile, hand him the ring to place on her slender finger. And this time it would be ended. He was her husband, the ring was the first link in the chain that was to bind them together.

The evening before the day fixed for his departure, the duke found an unusual degree of bustle and animation at his club. An extraordinary performance was to be held in the Salle des Fêtes. A select public had assembled to hear the "Education de la Princesse," an operetta in two acts, the words by the Duke de Féras, the music by M. Jules Trélan.

The performers were remarkable. Baron, of the Variétés, took the rôle of grand chamberlain; Daubray, of the Palais Royal, that of the Chevalier Alphonse de Rouflaquette; Saint-Germain, of the Gymnase, had consented to accept, for one night, that of Pepinster; the young Baron Trésorier, a member of the club, with a charming tenor voice, had assumed the character of Triolet; Mme. Judic, that of the Princess Hortensia, and Suzanne Lagier, that of the queen mother.

A great success was anticipated. From the grand vestibule hung Louis XIV. tapestry; a murmur of voices and rustling of dresses reached the duke along with puffs of warm air, redolent of *poudre à la marechale.* Instead of withdrawing to his chamber he tossed his overcoat to a valet and entered.

A trifling circumstance often decides the destiny of men. De Bligny in going to hear the "Education de la Princess" little dreamed that he was altering the course of his future life.

The Salle des Fêtes was sparkling with light. A numerous audience filled the chairs, an assemblage of satin, velvet, gauze and silk, the whole gamut of brilliant hues, above which gleamed the whiteness of dazzling shoulders, while the throng was agitated as with wings by the motion of fans. A buzz arose from time to time when some well-known person entered; at the further end, the stage, silent and severe, was concealed from view by the red drop curtain.

The duke approached a group of black coats, among whom he recognized some of his friends. In the midst of them, Maître Escaude, a young notary, the heir of arch-millionaire parents, was discoursing with an air of importance; but at sight of the duke he stopped short, and a profound silence ensued, broken only by the words, "how unfortunate!" uttered in a compassionate tone by a bald old man with a red face, large ears crested with tufts of yellow hair, a neck supported by a tall white cravat, diamond shirt buttons, and polished pumps, exposing to view his white stockings.

Bligny entered the group, and after shaking hands with his friends, waited, not a little perplexed by this eloquent silence. He was about to inquire the cause of his appearance having thus disconcerted the assemblage, when the old man whispered in the ear of one of his friends, loud enough to be heard and to make refusal impossible:

"Present me to the duke."

The friend turned toward Gaston with an air of annoyance and also of surprise, which seemed to say:

"What means the odd fancy of this popinjay?" then with resignation: "My dear duke, Monsieur Moulinet."

"Manufacturer," added the man with diamond buttons quickly, "former judge of the Tribunal de Commerce." And taking the young man's hand, he went on with an ingratiating air: "I have the honor, monsieur, to know your family. My daughter was educated at the convent with Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, your cousin—yes, monsieur, at the Sacre Cœur, the first house in Paris. I spared no expense where Athenaïs was concerned, the best was not good enough for her—and I beg you to believe that I have heard, with sincere regret, the unfortunate news—"

For a minute or so past M. Escaude had been incurring great risk of rumpling his shirt bosom, or disarranging the artistic tie of his cravat; he telegraphed with his arms, pattered his feet, hemmed, but Moulinet, too well under way or unwilling to be arrested, continued his complimentary condolences.

"I beg pardon," said the duke, "but I do not understand. You speak to me of bad news which touches my family, Mademoiselle de Beaulieu especially. Be so good as to explain yourself."

Maître Escaude appeared thoroughly provoked; and, as Moulinet remained silent and had assumed an appearance of unconcern, the young notary approached De Bligny.

"Mon Dieu! my dear duke," he said, "I am sorry that you should learn in such a manner as this the fact alluded to by Monsieur Moulinet. It will be only to anticipate, however, what you will

know to-morrow. When you entered I was telling these gentlemen, that having just returned from England, I learned there that the suit of the late Marquis de Beaulieu is lost without possibility of appeal."

At this unexpected revelation the duke turned pale. The loss of this suit, in which he knew Mme. de Beaulieu's chief hopes to be founded, meant ruin for Claire. He made an effort to master his agitation.

"Permit me to express my surprise, my dear maître, at the facility with which you make revelations with respect to the Beaulieu family. I did not suppose their affairs to be of a nature to furnish gossip to idlers."

"Believe me, my dear duke," began the notary with an injured air.

"I believe what I must," interrupted the duke, and coolly eying his interlocutor, he moved away followed by his friends.

Moulinet and Escaude looked at each other for a moment in silence; then the former said, grimacing a smile:

"An arrogant race these De Blignys. You got a sharp rebuff, hey? and I have been spattered with the mud. An arrogant race—this one ruined, hey?"

"Utterly," said the notary, disdainfully, "and he undertakes to play the *grand seigneur*—to dictate—give lessons to us."

"Precisely! Don't you see, in spite of all the revolutions, we will never be the equal of these men. The duke would be an advantageous husband for a rich girl."

The three strokes sounding at intervals with solemn slowness interrupted the discourse. Escaude and Moulinet took their seats. The caressing measure of a brilliant waltz filled the room with light melody. The duke had taken his seat a short distance off, and while apparently attentive to the music, was absorbed in deep thought. He had bound himself, and he wore on his heart the white jewel case stamped with the De Beaulieu and De Bligny arms which contained the engagement ring.

Nevertheless, Claire ruined, meant mediocrity for life, the necessity to bury himself in a provincial chateau, and vegetate as a gentleman farmer, seeing no one and dreading expenditure. This for the handsome, the seductive, the much sought after Gaston—burial in the brilliancy of his prime. He regretted bitterly the winnings that he had squandered; little to be desired as such means might be, it was money, and to live without resources in this practical age in which men were estimated by their pecuniary value, was to cease to live at all.

Then he thought compassionately of the despair of Claire and her mother, when the fatal news reached them. They were still ignorant of it, since this Escaude had brought it fresh from England. He would have wished to hasten his departure that he might be near to soften the blow.

The curtain rose upon a fresh sunny spring landscape, to the song of the reapers:

"Chantez, belles filles
Glanez, beaux garçons
Leves vos faucilles
Au bruit des chansons."

And the commonplace words changing the current of his thoughts; he saw himself with Claire at Beaulieu under a soft sky in the bright warmth of a summer's day, with the reapers singing in the fields. A delicious languor seemed to steal over him, and by the side of her whom he loved he felt himself happy with his poverty. It was a calm so profound, a rest so soothing, after his brief and stormy career as a *viveur!* He enjoyed it to the full, and in this mediocrity to which Claire's ruin condemned him, he caught a glimpse of gratifications alluring and as yet unknown.

On the stage the piece was developing, and the Chevalier Alphonse de Rouflaquette was singing his great duet with the princess. The warm caressing tones of Judic murmured with passionate ardor:

"Vieus! à ma grandeur pour toi je renonce,
Quittons mon palais, desertous ma cour."

And Daubray replies, passing his hand over the blonde locks on her forehead:

"Non pas! La grandeur n'exclut pas l'amour,
Rechesse et pauvoir, conserve en ce jour,
Conserve tout pour ton Alphonse."

And the popular artist rested on the concluding phrase with an effective pause which raised a storm of applause. The "Education de la Princess" promised a brilliant success.

Moulinet, extended in his chair, wagged his head like a bear listening to the flute. He was little concerned to follow the adventures of the Princess Hortensia; another princess interested him much more, his daughter, Athenaïs. He saw her as a little girl at the convent, her large feet and red hands, her irregular features and awkward angular figure. She came to the parlor to see him, amidst elegantly dressed companions, who eyed her disdainfully. Père Moulinet was not rich at this period, he had not yet founded his great chocolate manufactory at Villepinte, nor invented his blue paper prospectus, which had made his manufactures known throughout the smallest communes of France. He was a wholesale dealer in provincial produce, and the noble mothers of Athenaïs' companions did not disguise their astonishment that the heiress of the "grocer" had obtained admittance among their daughters. Echoes of various little intrigues had reached his ears. He knew the arrogant treatment his daughter had received, and at the head of the coterie of nobles he remembered the proud Mlle. de Beaulieu. How often had he heard angry words with reference to her enemy escape Athenaïs, together with vows to have her revenge. Had the vengeance come and even without their preparation? Athenaïs Moulinet was now one of the richest heiresses in Paris, and the proud Claire de Beaulieu a dowerless girl. The daughter of the "grocer," dressed by Worth, her hair becomingly arranged, made elegant, illuminated with the halo of millions, might now pass for one of the prettiest girls among the rich bourgeoisie. The daughter of the marchioness would disappear into the obscurity of the provinces, and this long prepared marriage with the Duke de Bligny—a brilliant nobleman, the bearer of a proud name—might come to naught.

Very often had Athenaïs turned pale with envious rage when

the duke, accompanied by his aunt, had visited Claire at the Sacre Cœur. Claire was to become a duchess, while she, Athenaïs, would wed some notary, an Escaude, or a manufacturer like her father, and look down in her turn on humiliated girls or base-born boys.

And Moulinet smiled proudly, as running his hand into one of his pockets, which gave forth a tinkling sound of silver pieces, he murmured: "Why may I not buy her a husband to her liking?" He looked around on the elegant crowd as if seeking the son-in law to his mind. With his millions, nothing was impossible. Who could refuse the hand of Athenaïs, when presented with a check whose value should be unspecified? Should it be a count or a marquis, and what sum was necessary to buy him? He had but to name it. Moulinet could give ten millions as easily as one. He could buy a prince for his daughter.

His eyes wandered boldly, almost menacingly over all these strange faces till they settled at last on the Duke de Bligny. His face was grave. "He is thinking of his cousin," thought Moulinet, with secret irritation. He could hardly have explained clearly the confused thoughts that arose in his mind, but a project began to take root there.

The curtain had just fallen on the first act, and amidst the applause he saw the duke rise and accompanied by his friends proceed toward the door. He quitted his seat, and followed the direction taken by the young men.

On the second floor the fête had not interrupted the gaming. The salons reserved for play were silent; hardly a faint murmur of the refrains of the operetta reached the ears of the players. They knew there was entertainment below, but what cared they? They found their enchantment around the table in horseshoe form beneath the burning gas-lights that parched their hair. Women were there elegantly dressed, grouped like a bouquet of deliciously perfumed flowers, but their queen of diamonds and queen of hearts were more alluring a hundred fold. Insensible to the attractions of the operetta, deaf to the voices of the singers, to the frenzied music of the orchestra with all its instruments joyously let loose, they continued to throw their pieces on the green cloth.

Mechanically the duke made his way to the salons, walking as though at random. Was it destiny that led him to this table after all his good resolves? The banker had just called out, "Gentlemen, make your bets." Gaston drew a thousand franc note from his pocket and let it fall with a distrait air. He won, with an exclamation of surprise, for he had grown a stranger to success. Curious to see whether his luck would continue, he seated himself at the table. At the same moment Moulinet entered.

It was the first time he had set foot there, for he abhorred "games of chance," preferring skill to luck. He approached the table, however, and seeing Gaston's hundred louis, placed ten francs beside the duke's pile; discreetly purchasing the opportunity to observe Bligny.

The game went on but the duke's luck changed. The ten francs of the virtuous tradesman seemed to have broken the charm. Bligny turned pale, and again overmastered by his passion, staked frantically his last notes. Moulinet, disdainful of winning, contin-

ued to throw down his ten francs. When at sunrise the game ceased for want of players, the duke had lost forty thousand francs, while Moulinet, long since satisfied respecting the destiny of Mlle. de Beaulieu's betrothed lover, slept a peaceful sleep in his superb hôtel in the boulevard Malesherbes.

At the hour when Gaston was to have taken the train for Beaulieu, with feverish pulse and nerves unstrung he was ascending the steps to his chamber. Standing by his window he leaned his arm on the rail and looked out on the sweepers who were beginning their morning task in the Rue de la Paix. The delicious freshness of the air revived him; the clear sky showed a faint rosy tint. "I have committed a folly," he said to himself, "but I will set out this evening. *Au diable* baccara!" He dressed, went down stairs, and took a carriage for the Bois de Boulogne. In the evening he would set out and would return no more to the gaming table.

Meanwhile Claire, unshaken in her trust and steadfast in her love, awaited the return of her betrothed.

CHAPTER V.

THE evening of the day on which Bachelin had brought his disastrous tidings to the château, the marchioness, still stunned by the blow, was seated in her cushioned arm-chair absorbed in deep thought. Her meditations were interrupted by the sudden entrance of the marquis. She started, and looked up anxiously, as if dreading some new catastrophe, and seeing him calm and smiling, heaved a sigh of relief.

"Our cousins have arrived, mother," he said, "the carriage has entered the avenue."

As he spoke the sound of wheels on the gravel walk reached them through the soft evening air. The marchioness threw a lace scarf over her head, drew her shawl around her and crossing the vestibule came out on the flight of stairs as a carriage stopped before it. A laughing face appeared at the door, a hand gloved with *peau de Suède* was waved gayly and a clear fresh voice called out a spirited "how d'ye do."

The young marquis was already at the carriage door. A torrent of silk issued from it beneath which emerged a little reddish-brown kid boot, a pretty ankle in a gray silk stocking, and the Baroness de Préfont in person sprung into the arms of the marchioness with: "Ah, aunt, how happy I am! how long it has been! and you my dear cousins—my dear Claire! it seems a century since I have seen you!" Then passing on to Octave, she permitted him to touch her cheeks, shook hands with him heartily à l'anglaise, laughing, rustling her dress, pausing between her exclamations only long enough to take breath; storming the château with bursts of ecstasy. Then with a sudden change to seriousness she exclaimed:

"Ah! mon Dieu, where is my husband?" With a rapid glance around: "Has my husband deserted me?"

A subdued voice replied: "Here I am, *chère amie*. I have been patiently awaiting the end of your effusions to present myself to the ladies."

And emerging from an obscure corner a young man about thirty, in traveling dress, approached the marchioness and Claire with a quiet smile.

"*Eh bien!* make your bow then," said the baroness quickly. "There! it is done! Now go and look after the unloading of my luggage. I recommend to your special attention the large black box which contains my hats. Will you answer for it with your head?"

"Yes, *chère amie*," replied the baron quietly. And turning to Octave: "There are nineteen of them," he added with a resigned smile, "three hundred *kilos* over weight! I believe my wife transports artillery!"

The ladies returned together to the salon. "Ah! my dear aunt," whispered the baroness, leaning toward the marchioness, "how much we have to tell you." And with an air of sympathy, "you know how we love you and that nothing that concerns you is indifferent to us."

As Mme. de Beaulieu remarked with uneasiness that Claire was listening with interested attention, "I know," she went on, "my husband will tell you all." And turning toward Claire to dissipate the effect of her imprudent words:

"Do you know we are going to Switzerland? But we could not pass so near Beaulieu without stopping. We will remain several days; we are going in a carriage and will enter by the Verrières pass. Alas, our poor army of the East! The baron was wounded at Joux in the last fight of the rear guard with the Badois of this terrible Werder. It is for me a pilgrimage, you understand; my husband bore himself like a hero. His company numbered over two hundred men—poor boys, frozen in the snow—how dreadful! he brought back only eighty, and they have not been presented with the Legion of Honor. True, we are Legitimists. Ah! what an abomination this government is! Do you all think Gambetta will accept the ministry?"

And the little baroness went on with increasing animation, growing dramatic or prattling like a hen-parrot as she passed from subject to subject with a confusing mobility of ideas and variety of expression; a living kaleidoscope, varying her design and aspect every moment. The marchioness and Claire listened in wonder and confusion. In their quiet country life, they had grown serious and thoughtful. The flightiness of the volatile Parisian affected them with a sensation of giddiness.

Without waiting for a reply to her question, the baroness crossed the salon and approaching a window with a prospect of the well-shaded valley where the chimneys of the manufactory emitted fiery flames into the darkness, exclaimed, clapping her hands with childish glee:

"How beautiful! It looks like a scene at the opera. Ah! nature! How fortunate you are to live among fields and woods! a delightful existence, and how it preserves one. Look at me, aunt, and compare me with Claire. We are the same age and I might be taken for her mother. Balls, dinners, visiting, theaters. Parisian excitement fatigues and wears one out so. Much pleasure is hard work! You smile, aunt, you are about to say that my husband and I might live differently if we would, we might pass four months at Bourgogne.

But the baron is a savant, he has his intellectual center at the capital, his scientific assemblies and the Academy. Ah! mon Dieu! the Academy! I have a thousand obligations that I cannot escape, friends to entertain, charitable works to superintend—and lastly my daughter whom I cannot leave with only her governess. And when we have spent two months at the sea and two at Nice—you see what remains—ah! I am quite worn out! Let us sit down!"

And passing like a whirlwind by the marchioness and Claire the baroness plunged into the depths of Mme de Beaulieu's arm-chair.

"Now tell me about yourselves. What do you do here? How do you employ your time? And Octave? And your neighbor the iron-master? You see I remember what you have written me. Ma foi! what would become of one without a little head!"

Gathering herself up in the great arm-chair the baroness closed her eyes languidly and prepared to listen with a good will to her aunt and cousin. There was a momentary silence, then almost without transition, like a bird that having sent out its last note falls asleep in its nest, she leaned her head back on the lace-covered chair and her light breathing indicated that she slept. The marchioness and Claire exchanged a smile of amusement as each took up her work while waiting for their volatile guest to awaken.

The Baroness de Préfont, née Sophie d'Hennecourt, was an only child of the Marquis de Beaulieu's sister. She had been educated at the convent with Claire, had known M. Moulinet's heiress and had contributed not a little to the hatred of Athenaïs for Mlle de Beaulieu. Good-hearted, but heedless, one half of her life was spent in repairing the harm done by the other half. From Athenaïs' first appearance at the convent she had nicknamed her "little Cocoa," and war had been on the eve of breaking out between them when Claire interposed in a tone of authority, and put a stop to it. Athenaïs had been more irritated against her who opposed than against her who attacked her. Claire's precocious strength of character procured for her an ascendency over all her companions, and to Athenaïs she seemed in some sort the incarnation of the aristocracy which rendered her life so distasteful. Everything in the patrician girl offended and irritated the bourgeoise—the elegance of her figure, the whiteness of her hands, the rich simplicity of her dress, even her stamped paper and the gloves which she wore during recreation hours. Claire was perfectly aware of the hostility of the little Moulinet, but she paid no heed to it, and, unconsciously perhaps to herself, her disdain of Athenaïs became accentuated. Between the two there existed a secret antagonism; it was perfectly understood that Mlle. Moulinet was the enemy of Mlle. de Beaulieu, and the pair were not unevenly matched.

Père Moulinet was then in the way of amassing a great fortune. It was asserted that he had discovered a process of making vanilla from charcoal, that he used grated almonds for cocoa, and that this alimentary chemistry yielded him enormous profits. He had been made a judge of the Tribunal de Commerce, and had begun to be regarded in the Parisian world as a man who possessed a financial value.

One day he came to the Sacre Cœur in a handsome two-horse landau, sent for his daughter to the parlor, and Athenaïs appeared

no more at the convent. The next Sunday her comrades met her in the Bois in her father's superb carriage and were greeted by her with eager smiles from the heights of her elegant equipage. A few months later, Sophie and Claire also returned to their homes, and the war ended. Sophie shortly after married. The Duke de Bligny being absent, Claire's existence had become one of retirement, and the last six months had been passed away from Paris. All recollection of Athenaïs had faded from her mind, and as she watched the Baroness de Préfont slumbering softly in the great arm-chair, she thought of anything else rather than of the strifes to which her lively humor had formerly given the signal.

The opening of the door aroused the baroness. She saw Octave enter with her husband, and springing up quickly, recovered her senses in an instant.

"Ah! ciel! you have let me fall asleep!" And beginning to laugh, "This is the castle of the Sleeping Beauty of fairy-tale. One no sooner enters here than one falls asleep. But where is Prince Charming? Is it you, baron? No, it is Octave. Pardon me, aunt, it was the air of your country. We are not accustomed to such an atmosphere in Paris."

The baron approached with quiet gravity.

"I have executed your commands, *chère amie*, I have had your luggage brought in. The whole chateau is encumbered with it."

"Very well," replied the baroness, with the air of a queen content with the obedience of her subjects.

"Shall I show you to your room?" asked Claire, seeing the baroness still standing.

"Yes, thanks," she replied. And taking a red leather satchel stamped with her arms from the chair on which she had deposited it upon entering, she gave a glance toward her husband. The latter hastened to relieve her, but withdrawing it quickly:

"No, no, not you," she said, "you are too *distrait*, and it must have careful handling. Here you, Octave," with a sign to her husband, indicating the marchioness.

"Your confidence is flattering," retorted Préfont, with a smile. "Go, Octave, my boy, discharge your office. I will remain with your mother."

The baroness nodded approval to her husband for taking her hint, and putting her hand on Claire's arm to insure her leaving the two to the *tête-à-tête* she had contrived, they left the room together, the baroness humming an air.

The baron, grave and preoccupied, took a turn in the room in silence. The salon was dark. A fire was crackling in the red granite chimney-place, and dancing to and fro on the ceiling. The marchioness was saying to herself that the baron perhaps brought more favorable news from Paris than they had had from Bachelin, and beginning to entertain a glimmering of hope. The rapid tread of the young women could be heard on the floor above, waking strange echoes in the old mansion, while a subtle trace of the notes the baroness had been humming still seemed joyously vibrating in the air.

The marchioness at last roused herself from her meditations, raised her eyes, and seeing the baron standing before her, said:

"Well, nephew, you have something to say to me in confidence. I have a suspicion of its nature, and am as you see much concerned."

"It is indeed a sad affair," replied the young man, "and it will not add to the esteem in which our class is held; for when one of us, alas! is false to his obligations, the rest must suffer for it. Our only superiority over the other ranks of society is in our loyalty to our word. 'On the word of a gentleman,' is still a proverb. When men cease to recognize in us this respect for our pledges our last boast will have departed."

"Tell me all," said the marchioness, raising her thin slender hand toward the baron, "conceal nothing from me. I have already been informed by Bachelin that the Duke de Bligny has been in Paris for six weeks."

"Ah! really, you knew that!" said the baron; "did you know also that he is about to be married?"

"To be married!" exclaimed Mme. de Beaulieu, in stupefaction, raising herself in her chair, and turning almost as white as her snowy hair.

"Yes, my dear aunt. Pardon my abruptness, but it appeared to me best to come directly to the point."

"To be married!" repeated the marchioness, slowly.

"The duke has made every effort to prevent it from transpiring, but the future father-in-law, who is, it seems, the vulgarest of bourgeois, is less reticent. He is exultant at the prospect of his daughter becoming a duchess. I heard how it was brought about by Castéran, an intimate friend of the duke, and I regret to say that nothing could be more deplorable. The duke had no sooner arrived in Paris than he engaged in heavy gambling at his club, was unlucky, and soon came to the end of his slender resources. He then had recourse to the club cash-box, where he obtained the necessary funds to meet his engagements. He continued to play, and at the end of a week found himself two hundred and fifty thousand francs in arrears. He lost his head completely, it seems, and maddened by his ill luck threw away his money blindly. In two evenings he won back all, then lost a hundred thousand francs, and ended with a *culotte* of two hundred thousand francs."

The marchioness looked at her nephew inquiringly. "A *culotte?*" she repeated.

"Excuse me, that is the technical expression used to denote a heavy loss at play."

"A *culotte* of two hundred thousand francs," said the marchioness, smiling sadly, "that is an expensive garment."

"Especially since Gaston had not a sou with which to pay for it, and in the clubs, debts of this kind must be settled at once under pain of public expulsion. You see, therefore, that the duke's situation was critical. Mon Dieu! he should have applied to the family. Though our property is landed estate, the countess and I could have let him have a part, and he could have arranged for the rest. But he did not, or rather he would not, though Castéran recommended it. He shut himself up in his club chamber, a prey to gloomy reflections on his situation and his future. Then it was that Destiny intervened in the form of the future father-in-law. The latter approached him with: 'M. the Duke, you owe two hundred thousand

francs which you must procure during the day, and you cannot do it.' The duke was about to cut short, very unceremoniously, such language on the part of this stranger, when the old man stopped him with: 'These two hundred thousand francs I bring you. I am enormously rich, and it shall not be said that a man with a dowry of ten millions for his only daughter has allowed the name of one of the noblest families in the land to be compromised for a paltry thousand louis!' It was a tempting sum, was it not? I do not guarantee absolute accuracy as to the amount, but so it was told to me. The unlucky De Bligny was dazzled and, dame! the cash box of his unexpected benefactor being offered to him, he put in his little finger, the hand followed, and then the rest, title inclusive."

There was a pause, during which the silence was only broken by the ticking of the Louis Fourteenth clock The room had grown so dark that the baron could hardly discern the proudly erect head of the marchioness. Suddenly he heard the sound of a half-suppressed sob. Finding no words to console this grief that was stronger than pride, he seated himself on a tapestry stool by the side of the marchioness, and pressed her hand tenderly.

"It is nothing," she said, softly, "the blow was so severe—I could not for the moment control myself. I have loved Gaston so! He has been a son to me, he is my own blood and his wrong-doing touches me doubly. I am at a loss to understand such ingratitude on his part; he was a generous, true hearted boy. How could he change so suddenly? Can the world undo in a few months the work of years? He was so carefully and tenderly reared, and this is how he requites it! Ah! the ingrate! the ingrate!"

Much moved, the baron took from the table the ivory needle with which the marchioness had been crocheting, and vented his feelings by sticking it with nervous fingers in and out of a ball of gray worsted. The marchioness recovered her composure and dried her eyes.

"The point of most importance," she went on, "is to be very prudent with Claire. She is proud and passionate; like her father, good-hearted, but willful. This blow will find her faith perfectly unshaken. She spoke of Gaston to me this morning; the idea that he could think of another woman has never presented itself to her mind. True and frank herself, she sees only truth and frankness in others. Such an undeceiving in a character like hers may have grave consequences."

"But might not some steps be taken which would alter the situation with respect to De Bligny? Gaston has simply been led away, and by pointing out to him the gravity of his offense, he may be brought to reconsider his course. If you wish it I am at your disposal to make the attempt."

"No," said the marchioness, haughtily, "we are not among those who humble themselves to supplicate. Our position is unfortunate, but it is irreproachable, and I shall do nothing to change it. I shall tell my daughter the sad truth, that my nephew's engagement with his new fiancée is irrevocable. For," added Mme. de Beaulieu, "a man so capricious is not to be counted on—he may change again."

"As you think best," said the baron. "I cannot censure your decision, though I deemed it my duty to offer to bring about a re-

conciliation. Whatever happens, though you may shed a few secret tears, you will not have to wear a false face, which is more than can be said for the duke."

Footsteps were heard on the grand staircase, and a sound of merry voices. The door opened, and like an avalanche the baroness preceded her cousins into the dark solemn salon.

"Mon Dieu! you are without a light; how dismal it is here! It is like talking in a tomb—one can't hear one's self speak for the darkness. You are spoiling us, aunt; the baron and I have the handsomest room in the château. We shall be too well satisfied ever to leave it."

"So much the better, my dear. But I think your journey must have given you an appetite. We will go to dinner."

At the same moment, as if some one had been waiting for Mme. de Beaulieu's words, the doors of the dining-room were thrown open, where a flood of light was streaming over the old porcelain and massive silver plate, and a steward in grave and solemn tones announced dinner.

CHAPTER VI.

The day after M. and Mme. de Préfont arrived at Beaulieu, and very seasonably with respect to creating a little interest in the existence of the baroness, who already began to find a sojourn in the country virtuously wearisome, M. Derblay and his sister presented themselves at the château.

Beneath a large tent cloth the inhabitants of Beaulieu were enjoying one of those bright October days which is the last smile of the year soon to become drear and icy. In the park shrubbery, the birds, beguiled by the heat of the sun, had resumed their summer songs, and on the glowing sand of the terrace two yellow-beaked blackbirds were disputing the crumbs of bread thrown by the marquis from the dining-room window. The marchioness, enveloped in her shawls, was giving a *distrait* ear to Claire and the baroness, who talked together with their elbows resting on the balustrade. The baron was stretched back in a rocking-chair silently puffing slow whiffs from his cigar toward the blue sky, while the marquis was engaged in slyly sketching in his memorandum book the silhouettes of the two young women which stood out gracefully against the clear horizon.

The step of the servant on the sand walk suddenly roused them from the physical and mental torpor that was slowly creeping over them all. The marchioness opened her eyes, Claire and the baroness raised theirs from the valley where they had been resting, the marquis hastily thrust his note-book into his pocket. The baron only, chary of needless movement, was content to lower his head a trifle.

"Monsieur and mademoiselle Derblay inquire whether Madame the Marchioness receives," said the valet.

Claire's brow contracted imperceptibly. The name of this man by whom she had an instinctive consciousness that she was being pursued, irritated her. She felt a sort of presentiment that this stranger was destined to exercise an influence over her life, and was full of revolt at the thought. A sudden rush of better feelings came

over her, at the bottom of which was a confused sense of abandonment. How could M. Derblay, after his demonstrations, timid though they were, dare to present himself at the château? Bachelin, it was true, had announced this visit. It had to do with a business agreement which was to be made, but this question of business was only a pretext. Was this man audacious enough to see in the duke's neglect an opportunity to approach her? All these thoughts passed confusedly through her brain in an instant, and resulted in an aversion for Philippe which dated from this moment.

"Receive him, aunt," cried the baroness; "I am curious to see this iron-master. He will amuse us, and we will have his sister give us the village gossip. She wears the costume of the country, no doubt. How droll it will be!"

"It is my intention to receive him, my dear," replied the marchioness, smiling, and turning to the servant: "Show Monsieur and Mademoiselle Derblay here."

There was silence for a moment, and then the large glass door of the salon opened, and Philippe and Suzanne appeared on the steps, a ray of sunshine lighting up Philippe's dark manly features. His sister, in a simple dark blue dress, pressed timidly against him, her face beaming with emotion, and her large eyes fastened on her brother with earnest solicitude, anxious to inspire him with courage.

The marchioness rose and advanced to meet her guests. Philippe bowed respectfully, stammering some disjointed words, whose confusion brought a smile to the lips of the high-born dame. Then, to relieve his embarrassment, she took Suzanne's hand with charming grace:

"Tell your brother, my child, that he is welcome to Beaulieu."

"My sister, Madame the Marchioness," said Philippe, raising his head, "has grown up with me without the needful counsels and cares of a mother. She could not find a better substitute for them than with you, if you would kindly take an interest in her."

Mme. de Beaulieu looked more attentively at Suzanne. "Come, let me embrace you, my dear child," and touching her blonde locks with her lips: "Here is peace signed between us," she said to Philippe. "Your sins are forgiven, neighbor. Now let me present you to my family."

And designating Octave, who approached: "The Marquis de Beaulieu, my son."

"No introduction is necessary," said Octave, smiling and offering Philippe his hand. "Monsieur Derblay and I have already met. Diable! neighbor, you have good limbs; your hares don't run as fast as you when it is not your intention to be caught up with."

"Excuse me, Monsieur the Marquis," replied Philippe, smiling, "you seemed not very well affected toward me, and I doubted the welcome I should receive if I betrayed my incognito."

"Parbleu! I know of you, then, only through our disagreement; but now the case is different, and we shall be good friends, I hope. Will you be kind enough to present me to Mademoiselle Derblay?" he added, approaching Suzanne with *empressement*.

Mme. de Beaulieu, turning toward the baroness and Claire, said:

"Monsieur Derblay, the iron-master of Pont-Avesnes, the Bar-

oness de Préfont, my niece, and Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, my daughter."

A hot flame overspread Philippe's face. Without daring to raise his eyes to Claire, he bowed so profoundly that he appeared about to sink on his knees.

"My dear, he is a gentleman," whispered the baroness to Claire. "I pictured him with bare arms, a leather apron, and filings in his hair. Bless me, he has the Legion of Honor, and the baron hasn't! It is true that under this wretched *régime*—how extraordinary! He doesn't handle the hammer then. Look at him, it is incredible—he is very good-looking, what magnificent eyes!"

Claire, who had turned away, now raised her eyes and rested them almost sternly on Philippe. She was secretly indignant, and would have been glad to greet the audacious stranger with words that were cutting and offensive. His strong, squarely built figure she found vulgar, everything about him revolted her, even to his severely somber dress. And in a rapid vision the duke appeared before her with his elegant, rather slender figure, his elongated features, chestnut hair, blue eyes, refined mouth, and blonde mustache. Between Philippe in person and the phantom of the duke, the contrast was complete. The one well embodied in his robust person the healthful vigor of the bourgeoise, the other was the finished type of the delicate, enervated grace of the noblesse.

Philippe stood speechless under Claire's gaze. His feet seemed to have taken root in the earth. Thoroughly disconcerted, and anxious to escape the hostile scrutiny of those eyes, he attempted to move a step or two in the direction of the marquis, who was talking with Suzanne, that he might attach himself to some one more kindly disposed; but he could not. He glanced mechanically at his own person, and he saw himself clumsy, coarse, inelegant. He drew bitter comparisons between himself and the two young men before him in the easy grace of their well-made clothing; and his black frock coat appeared to him hideous. He must be grotesque, with his high-crowned hat in his hand, he thought, and he suffered torments. He would gladly have given ten years of his life to have in that moment the careless ease of the baron and Octave. How could Claire ever forget the aspect under which he had first presented himself to her? She would preserve always an unfavorable impression of him. He measured the distance between Mlle. de Beaulieu, even ruined in fortune, and the iron-master of Pont-Avesnes, and despairingly reproached himself with having raised his eyes to a height which his ambition could never hope to reach.

The voice of Octave roused him from his stupor.

"We have some one here, Monsieur Derblay, who is, I think, capable of entering the lists with you on the manufacturing question—my cousin, the Baron de Préfont, a savant—"

"Say a student, my dear Octave," interrupted the baron modestly. "The field of science is too large for me to make any claim to explore more than a small corner of it."

Philippe, recovering himself, sought Mlle. de Beaulieu's eyes, but she had moved away and was walking along the terrace by the side of the baroness, striking with the end of her red silk umbrella the roses of a twining bush that interlaced the balustrade.

The iron-master, with a sigh, turned away from the captivating vision.

"It is not the first time," he said, "that I have heard of Monsieur de Préfont Is not monsieur the author of a valuable work on cementation? I have read with a lively interest your treatise addressed to the Academy of Science."

"Oh! oh! baron," cried Octave, "you did not expect to find that your fame had reached our mountains. You are on the road to celebrity, your name has penetrated the heart of the country, and to your old device, *Fortis gladio*, must be added, *et pennâ*. Don't fancy I am laughing at you; I would emulate you if I could."

But the words of the marquis had little concern for the baron. Delighted to encounter an appreciative listener, he launched into difficult disquisitions on the methods of melting steel, from which the intervention of the baroness herself would not have diverted him. His English impassiveness gave place to a most expansive freedom. He tapped his hands in illustration of the noise made by machines, and, waxing warm, gesticulating, took M. Derblay by the arm as if to make sure that his auditor would not escape him.

But Philippe had no wish to free himself from his interlocutor's aggressive familiarity. On the contrary, he encouraged it, thankful to discover an unexpected ally in this house where he felt himself so ill at ease. And the baron continued his outpourings, addressing Philippe as "my dear sir," which he would not have done under other circumstances at the end of a three months' acquaintance. Their common scientific pursuits had proved an instantaneous bond of union, like that of freemasons who have exchanged mysterious signs in touching hands.

"And you extract the ore yourself? How interesting your operations must be! I shall visit your workshops at Pont-Avesnes tomorrow. You must employ a large number of men?"

"Two thousand."

"Admirable! And how many furnaces?"

"Ten; the fires of which are never extinguished. You will see my pestle hammer. It weighs forty thousand kilos., and is worked with such precision that it could be made to fall on an egg without breaking it."

"With such an instrument as that you are a rival of Creuzot."

"Precisely; we do on a small scale what he does on a large one."

"I am truly fortunate to have met you, my dear sir. I had intended setting off with the baroness for Switzerland at the end of the week, but, *au diable!* this journey! I shall remain, you understand? Have you a laboratory? Yes! You are a chemist? Excellent!" And taking Philippe by the arm the baron began pacing the terrace.

"Ah! what is the matter with my husband?" exclaimed the baroness, who approached with Claire.

"The matter, my dear cousin," replied Octave, "is that he has mounted his favorite hobby-horse and taken Monsieur Derblay on behind."

"Then they will soon be at a distance from here, if the baron is not stopped."

"And why stop him?" said the marquis. "Do you object to

this familiarity between a descendant of the chevaliers, representing ten centuries of warlike greatness, and Monsieur Derblay, representing only the one century of steam, gas, and electricity? For my part, I admire the sudden intimacy of these two men, founded as it is on a mutual esteem for the two things that make a country great —glory in the past and progress in the present."

"Octave, my friend," said the baroness, "any one may see that you are a lawyer; you talk well. But allow me to say that such sentiments are strangely democratic from your father's son."

"Well, cousin," he replied, with a laugh, "democracy is overrunning us; we will try to form an aristocracy in the democracy by taking mediocrity for a level, and amassing whatever there is of merit above it. We will thus found the aristocracy of talent, the only one that is worthy to succeed that of birth. In so doing we will imitate our ancestors. Do you imagine that the founders of our houses were nobles? It was their courage that gave them their pre-eminence over other men. The first of the Préfonts was named Gaucher, which was no slur on his ability, I fancy, for it is said he was a redoubtable soldier. Advanced for his prowess and enriched by his booty, on his return from Palestine he took the name of his estates, and it is, thanks to Captain Gaucher, that you are a baroness. Why should we deny to men who are not inferior to him the right to come out from the multitude? Formerly it was, Honor to the bravest; now it is, Station for the most intelligent."

"Well reasoned and well spoken, Monsieur the Marquis. I beg Madame the Baroness to pardon me if I take sides against her," said a sonorous voice from behind a clump of shrubbery.

And Bachelin, very red, his hat in his hand, his well-stuffed leather case as usual under his arm, appeared in a corner of the terrace.

"Ah! Bachelin, your arrival is *à propos*," exclaimed the baroness gayly. "You limbs of the law all belong to the *Tiers-Etat*. The Revolution was made for your benefit. But you emerged like a devil from a surprise-box. Where do you come from?"

"I crossed the park. I came from Varenne, and have left my cabriolet at the little gate. But pardon—"

And turning toward Mme. de Beaulieu, who approached with Suzanne:

"My best respects, Madame the Marchioness. Mademoiselle Suzanne, my compliments; how warm it is to-day; I arrived in haste; I wanted to be here at the same time with Monsieur Derblay. But an important deed to sign detained me—a deed that has caused me great regret. It was for the sale of Varenne."

"Ah! the D'Estrelles have at last found a purchaser?" inquired the marquis.

"Yes, a purchaser," sighed Bachelin, "and a pretty price he pays for it. He was bent on this particular estate, and has given at least a third more than could have been realized even by subdividing it. He claims the honor of knowing the family of Madame the Marchioness. That doubtless is his reason for seeking the neighborhood of Beaulieu."

"May I ask his name?" said the marchioness, indifferently.

"Monsieur Moulinet."

Bachelin little anticipated the effect the announcement of the name of the purchaser of Varenne would produce. Mlle. de Beaulieu started suddenly from her seat, while the baroness, clapping her hands together quickly, exclaimed, "Athenaïs' father!"

"True, Monsieur Moulinet had with him a young lady whom he called Athenaïs," added the notary. "The estate was purchased for her, and is to make part of her dower when she marries. It has a present revenue of thirty thousand livres, and the leases are susceptible of increase."

"Ah! it is too much! these are to be your neighbors!" resumed the baroness. "And Monsieur Moulinet is to play lord castellan! he will have the air of his gardener!"

"Is he reputed very rich?" asked Bachelin.

"Enormously," replied the baroness, "ridiculously rich. See, Octave, here is where your theories lead, my dear. Here is your aristocracy of intelligence. Monsieur Moulinet is one of its finest representatives. The D'Estrelles, who have given France ten generals, two admirals, a marshal, and several ministers, the portraits of whose ancestors are hanging at Versailles, and whose names figure on the principal pages of our history, are driven from their château by a chocolate-maker who has not rendered his country a centime's worth of service, and whose name figures only on the prospectuses he has had distributed at the street corners. There is your democracy. Don't speak to me of a country where such abominations exist. It is utterly lost."

"Calm yourself, baroness," said Octave. "I agree with you in regretting that the D'Estrelles should be dispossessed of their chateau, but where was the remedy? Should Monsieur Moulinet's money have been taken to enrich our friends? That would be a slightly arbitrary measure. Except to torture him into the bargain, I hardly see what could be more unjustifiable."

"You are insufferable," exclaimed Mme. de Préfont, "you are merely trying to tease me and do not think a word that you say."

And taking the arm of the marchioness, she advanced to meet the baron, who was approaching with Philippe. Claire remained behind. This sudden apparition of M. Derblay and Athenaïs Moulinet in her hitherto strictly circumscribed life vexed her. Reared in a world which the pride of its inhabitants has surrounded with impassable barriers, this encroachment on her seclusion affected her as a painful surprise. The reception of M. Derblay on a footing of equality at the chateau made the old mansion seem as common in her eyes as the public streets. She resolved to set her face against this vulgar facility with which the chateau was disposed to lavish itself upon strangers, and seeing them all smiling and affable, she became severe and icy

There seemed a certain something mysterious and ominous in the surrounding atmosphere. The prolonged silence of the duke disquieted her more than she was prepared to allow, while an attitude of constraint, sudden relapses into silence when she approached, fitful demonstrations of tenderness, made her vaguely uneasy. It was her nature to face a contingency resolutely, but in this case she dared not. Dreading to learn that the duke was untrue to her, re-

coiling from a certainty of the unworthiness of the man she loved, she abstained from questionings and preserved a torturing silence.

Philippe saw her haughty and impassible, receiving his timid homage with ill-concealed disdain, and taking only sufficient notice of his presence to make him aware that it was distasteful to her. Suzanne, quite out of countenance, having vainly tried by a few pleasant words to relax the contracted lips of Mlle. de Beaulieu, had finally taken refuge with Bachelin, who covered her with the wing of his paternal affection. The politenesses of the marquis found her sad and discouraged. The illusions which she had created for herself had vanished in an instant, and she saw her brother's happiness seriously imperiled. But although her instinctive good sense enabled her to measure the distance which separated Philippe from the haughty and imposing Claire, she would not despair, but with the tenacious faith of a child trusted to Providence to remove the obstacles in some way which she could not anticipate.

The marchioness, still under the influence of Bachelin's eulogies, delighted, too, with the baron's enthusiasm for her neighbor, had gone so far as to invite Philippe to remain to dinner when an annihilating glance from her daughter led her to fear that she had been over-hasty. But a moment's reflection satisfied her that Claire's repugnance arose from a fit of unsociableness, and M. Derblay relieved her of all uncertainties by promptly and politely declining, urging pressing business as a pretext.

In reality he was impatient to get away. The two hours that he had passed on the Beaulieu terrace, listening to the baron but not understanding him, with his brow clasped, as it were, in a vise, and his mind racked with painful thoughts, had been hours of torture. This interview, so longed for, which he had looked forward to as a blissful moment in his life, had been one of the most trying he had ever experienced; he took his leave of his hosts of the chateau, depressed and disheartened, and ready to say farewell to his ambitious dreams.

Claire appeared to attach no greater importance to his departure than she had done to his arrival. She continued disdainfully silent, responding to his respectful bow with a slight inclination of her head, such as she would have accorded to one of her tradespeople; and Philippe's retreat would have been singularly like a rout if the allies whom he had secured had not given him much needed assistance. The baron showed on this occasion to what degree a passion can modify character. He accompanied Philippe to the gate and shook hands with him with the heartiness and unrestraint of traveling companions who have made the tour of France together. The marquis accompanied Suzanne, and proved by the prodigality of his polite attentions to the brother the interest which the sister had inspired; while Bachelin, with his ever-present leather case, brought up the rear. At the little park gate was stationed his cabriolet, the old gray horse attached to it philosophically browsing on the leaves of a filbert-tree, while awaiting the return of his master. Bachelin invited Philippe and Suzanne to take their seats, while the baron carried politeness so far as to hold the bridle of the nag—a needless precaution. The marquis exchanged a parting smile with Suzanne;

and as the notary touched the horse with his whip, he and the baron cried with one accord, "au revoir!"

Philippe in a trembling voice responded with a "never!" happily lost in the noise of the wheels. The notary turned suddenly:

"Never?" he repeated. "Never! Ah! my good friend, have you lost your senses? And why will you never return to Beaulieu?"

Philippe, thus questioned, made no further attempt to contain himself, but gave free vent to the bitter flood of his lost illusions.

Why should he prepare for himself unmerited humiliations by persevering in a too plainly hopeless enterprise? It were better to abandon it at once before the mischief had struck its roots deeper.

"And what, my friend, did you expect?" asked Bachelin, in a tone of irony. "From the violence of your disappointment, I am led to infer that you had great expectations. Did you think Mademoiselle de Beaulieu would make advances to you like a grisette to a student? In the world which you have just entered, feelings are manifested with much delicacy and reserve. There are no violent enthusiasms or openly betrayed antipathies. You have obtained incredible results on your first attempt; the men have been enraptured; the marquis is your friend, and the baron will prepare your way for you. The marchioness, catching the general infection, invites you to dinner the first day, as though you were a friend of twenty years' standing; and yet you complain! You are surely the most unreasonable of mortals. Mademoiselle Claire was a trifle cold, I grant. You expected her, I suppose, to spring into your arms. Ah! you travel too fast! Yesterday you dreamed of no happiness greater than to be near her for a few moments; you have just passed two hours in her company, and you utter exclamations of despair, upbraiding destiny. And you will not return there. You are mad! Firstly, you could not but return without appearing very ill-bred; and then, would you have it in your power to abstain from going to offer your devotions at the feet of the adorable Claire? Ah! friend, you are very happy to love; you are young; weep, suffer, the world has nothing better. Believe an old man who has received many confidences for forty years, and whose only regret now is—"

Bachelin, with an animated face and kindling eyes, was about to let slip some confession worth recording, but his eyes fell on Suzanne, who, while attentively listening, was stripping the petals from a beautiful rose, gathered by the marquis on the terrace of Beaulieu. The notary stopped suddenly, and whipped up his nag, which was deliberately trotting, with its head between its legs.

"Take my advice, my friend; return to Beaulieu. Mademoiselle Claire will soon have cruel trials to undergo, and events may singularly modify her attitude toward you. Ah! you have already ceased to say: 'Never!' To-morrow you will say: 'Forever!' But here we are at the Pont-Avesnes. I will not go in with you. I have pressing work for my clerks. A good appetite to you, and may you see everything rose colored!"

And after giving a parting grasp of Philippe's hand, and gallantly touching Suzanne's fingers with his lips, Bachelin drove rapidly down the principal street of the village, and disappeared in the angle of the great square.

Philippe heaved a sigh, opened the little gate of the court, and,

with head bent downward, followed his sister, who respected his silent grief, into the house, which, two hours before, he had quitted with a heart palpitating with eager hope.

CHAPTER VII.

THE Chateau of Varenne is one of the handsomest feudal structures now existing in France. Built by Enguerrand d'Estrelles, who signalized himsef at Bouvines by raising King Philip Augustus when unhorsed by a Flemish pikeman, it had been honored by harboring under its sharp-pointed turrets the Emperor Charles V., on his return from the siege of Nancy. Demolished by the cannon of Turenne during a brush between the illustrious marshal and the Austrian Imperialists, previous to his bloody campaign in the Palatinate, the donjon of Varenne continued in ruins during the reigns of Louis XV. and Louis XVI.

The Revolution could accomplish no further destruction, and the citizens of Besançon were forced to content themselves with cutting down the forests and robbing its stones. The manor house, drawn upon like a quarry, furnished the materials of more than twenty buildings, and a dealer in old metal had made his fortune by pillaging three hundred thousand kilos of lead roofing which he sold openly.

It was these organized robberies, strange to tell, that preserved the d'Estrelles from ruin. The commune of Besançon could not dispose of the estates as public property, because no one dared incur the ill-will of the peasantry and citizens, who had come to look upon it as their conquered spoils.

Under the Directory, the d'Estrelles were permitted by Barras to return to France. Although their property had been sacked, they were not dispossessed, and they established themselves in a guard-house after restoring its doors and windows. With the residue of their estates carefully administered during the Empire, they succeeded in reconstructing a fortune which enabled them to return to Paris during the Restoration, and to make a good figure there. Under the monarchy of July the last of the d'Estrelles married a daughter of the banker Claude Chrétien, created a baron for services rendered to the civil list, who brought him as dowry an income of two hundred thousand francs.

This noble had a passion for antiquities. The chateau was restored at vast expense to its former condition; the high walls crowned with embattled earthworks, the superb towers with their curiously sculptured gargoyles once more reared their heads above the great trees of the park. The furniture was renewed with exquisite taste.

Preparing the fashion, M. d'Estrelles procured under-cut credence tables, church woodwork, the chefs-d'œuvres of image-cutters of the middle ages, and marvelous Flemish tapestry.

Varenne became a museum of those artistic treasures, which were then disdained, and which are now so eagerly sought after.

In the eyes of its impassioned collector, it had become transformed into a paradise of antiquities.

On his death, M. d'Estrelles left his estate, completely re-established, to his son, a young lieutenant who already had found occasion to employ counsel. In four years, it was mortgaged for a fourth of its value, and its treasures of art were on the eve of being sold in Paris at public auction, when a purchaser presented himself in the person of M. Moulinet.

The manufacturer, in pursuance of his object of a marriage between the duke and his daughter, had conceived at first the idea of buying De Bligny's estate in Touraine. But his future son-in-law's ancestral chateau had, in passing from one master to another, come into possession of a rich crockery dealer of Blois, who disdained Moulinet's offers, tempting though they were.

Failing this, Athenaïs' father had fallen back upon Varenne, and, all things considered, was well content with his acquisition.

Its proximity to Beaulieu had made one of its recommendations. Moulinet would thus find himself *en famille*, and the opportunities that would arise for neighborly association would be altogether acceptable. He had been a faithful executor of his daughter's will in the choice of her husband; and, without having measured fully the perfidy of Athenaïs' covert designs, he was prepared to encounter a certain degree of reluctance on the part of the duke's relatives to establish friendly relations with him.

Gaston was to have married his cousin; but it pleased the ambitious father to view this engagement as a mere childish pastime, and to refuse to admit that any profound attachment on the part of one of them, at least, could have been the result of this youthful betrothal.

He had himself, when a little druggist's clerk in the Rue des Lombards, been engaged to the thirteen-year-old daughter of a carpenter in the Rue de la Ferronnerie. The carpenter's daughter had been forgotten by him, and had married a butcher of the Place des Innocents. He had seen her one day, stout and red, weighing chops in large copper scales, while he, Moulinet, inhabited a fine hotel in the Boulevard Malesherbes.

What possible relation could arise between this robust butcher's wife and the judge of the Tribunal de Commerce?

It belonged to the sphere of destiny to rectify the foolishness of such projects. In becoming separated, they had each found their proper and appropriate place. Was not the case of Mlle. de Beaulieu and the duke precisely similar?

United, they must have been condemned to a life of mediocrity. Separated, each would be well rid of the affair. Mlle. de Beaulieu would, without doubt, find a suitable settlement in life. He, Moulinet, would even assist her to do so himself.

But the argument that outweighed every other was that such was his pleasure.

In the Duke of Bligny he had found the son-in-law to his mind. He, a man who had compelled fortune, was not a man to be thwarted in the accomplishment of anything he might chance to set his mind upon. His daughter was to be a duchess; to that he had made up his mind, and a duchess she would be.

The grandeurs of Varenne tickled his vanity immensely. Its em-

battled towers, its machicolated sentry-boxes, the belfry that tolled the hours with solemn strokes, enchanted the parvenu.

Swelling with importance, the rich merchant felt himself to be in his rightful place in the high hall of the guards around whose walls hung the armorial bearings of the allies of the ancient house of Estrelles. It was with ineffable satisfaction that he retired to rest where the conqueror of Pavia had slept, and rolled his plebeian person on the pillared bedstead elevated upon a splendid dais, and hung with curtains of *point de Venise*. He repeated incessantly, with emphatic complacency: "My clock was formerly wound up by Charles V;" and believed very sincerely that the great emperor had spent his life regulating clocks, as he did, during his latter years, at Saint Just, to beguile the ennui that consumed his great mind.

Athenaïs, less influenced by the delights of gratified vanity, saw in the chateau only a dangerous fortress, whence she might swoop down upon her foe. The great advantage which Varenne possessed in her eyes was that it reared its proud and splendid turrets at hardly two leagues distance from Beaulieu.

From thence she dominated the situation, and might, in all security, await her hour to strike surely the girl whom she hated with all the strength of her nature.

The day after her establishment there, which was the day following the signing of the deed drawn up by Bachelin, she had adroitly informed herself respecting the situation. She knew that the baroness was with Claire, but an adversary the more was no ground for intimidation. On the contrary she found satisfaction in the thought of triumphing over the proud Mlle. de Beaulieu under the eyes of Mme. de Préfont.

Moulinet and Athenaïs had now been for three days inmates of the chateau. After a repeated and detailed tour of his park, kitchens and outbuildings, the purchaser of Varenne was beginning to find himself *ennuyé* in his splendid estate when a dispatch reached him announcing the coming of the duke, sooner than had been anticipated. This premature arrival vexed Athenaïs greatly. She feared that the duke would be in a mood which would counteract her projects. It was without doubt Gaston's intention to deal carefully with the injured susceptibilities of his family, and any step on her part which would wound Mlle. de Beaulieu would meet with strenuous opposition from him. Athenaïs resolved, therefore, to act before the duke could interfere with her. He was to arrive that day at three. Not a moment, therefore, was to be lost.

Moulinet, still crumpling the dispatch mechanially in his fingers, was pacing the superb terrace extending along the front of the chateau, when his daughter in a delicious toilet came toward him, disguising the vehemence of her resolve under an assumption of carelessness.

"Well, papa, we must go to-day to Beaulieu," she said with a smile.

"Why to-day?" asked Moulinet, in surprise. "The duke is coming, would it not be well to wait for him? We shall be better received under his auspices, and he will present us himself to his family."

"It is precisely what I do not wish," replied Athenaïs, preserv-

ing a tranquil countenance. "There is no need of any one to mediate between Claire and me, and she would naturally be astonished not to have heard from myself of my approaching marriage. And then Monsieur de Bligny is in a somewhat false position with respect to us, and will thank us for sparing him the difficulties of the first interview. The situation once clearly defined, there will be no returning to former ideas, and all will go well. You do not fear to be ill received?"

"Ill received!" exclaimed Moulinet, raising himself to his full height, and plunging his hands vehemently into his pantaloon's pockets. "A man in my position, a former judge of the Tribunal de Commerce, is ill received nowhere. If w did not live under a government of nothing at all, and if there existed a court at the Tuileries, understand, my daughter, I would be perfectly at home there. Ill received! By persons who have perhaps not more than sixty thousand livres income! It would be a curious spectacle! Wait awhile! I will order the grand carriage and full-dress liveries."

"No, papa, undress livery and a victoria. We want no display of our wealth. The richer we are, the more modest we must be. They would laugh at our luxury, they will admire our simplicity."

"You thinks so?" asked M. Moulinet, in a tone of regret. "It seems to me the short trousers and silk stockings would have made a good impression, but I leave it to you. You are a girl of taste, and know the ways of good society. Get ready, while I go to the stables and give orders."

A quarter of an hour later Athenaïs and her father, drawn by two vigorous coach-horses, were rolling over the dusty Pont-Avesnes road.

Forgetting the resolutions formed in a moment of discouragement, Philippe had returned to the chateau. In truth, the baron had allowed him no opportunity to retire into his solitude. This imitator of Louis XVI., in his passion for the mechanic arts, had made his appearance at the manufactory the morning after Philippe's visit to Beaulieu, and removing his coat and rolling up his sleeves had ended by making it necessary for the iron-master to provide him with a change of clothing, and detain him to dinner. How, after this, was he to avoid returning with him to Beaulieu? Philippe found such good reasons in excuse for his weakness, that he could see, without displeasure, the spot where he had passed two hours of agony. Claire was as before cold and indifferent, but her haughty and disdainful attitude, instead of disconcerting the iron-master, had this time the effect of arousing him, and the more Mlle. de Beaulieu affected to ignore him, the more he felt incited to try and compel her notice of him.

The marchioness was a woman whom nature had endowed with a perfect evenness of temper. Such as she had been yesterday, she was found to-morrow. Philippe had won her good graces from the outset; she welcomed him with her accustomed affability, placing him quite at his ease, while the baroness displayed for him the graces of her sprightly and volatile wit. She found him agreeable without effort, and interesting without pretension, pronounced him as solid in mind as in physique, and honored him with her peculiar esteem. While Moulinet and Athenaïs were on the road to Beaulieu, the

baroness, Octave, Suzanne, and the baron were engaged in an animated game of croquet, the battle-field being the lawn situated between the outbuildings and the entrance gate, in the middle of the large court. Through the open windows the blows of the mallets and exclamations of the players reached the marchioness and Claire, who remained in the salon indifferent to the contest. Philippe and Bachelin, constituted judges, followed the progress of the balls, and on a disputed point arising measured the distances with a rule.

Victory seemed inclining to the baron and Suzanne, when a carriage, which stopped before the gate, suddenly arrested the attention of the players. At the same moment the entry bell vigorously sounded by the valet left no doubt that guests had arrived.

In a second the players made their escape to the drawing-room like a flock of sheep, and a servant approached the marchioness with a card. The latter adjusting her glasses glanced at the square of bristol board, and raising her head with an air of astonishment, read:

"Monsieur and Mlle. Moulinet." There was a moment of silence, all seeming to feel that the event was serious. The baroness first recovered herself, and striking her hands together, murmured:

"This is too much!"

"What do these people come here for?" asked Mme. de Beaulieu, quietly.

No one replying, Bachelin assumed the place of spokesman.

"Monsieur and Mademoiselle Moulinet having established themselves in the country, Madame the Marchioness, no doubt think it behooves them to pay neighborly visits. That is the custom, you know. The Beaulieu family is one of the oldest and most important in the province, and Monsieur Moulinet claims, also, does he not, that his daughter knew Mademoiselle Claire?"

"Of course, aunt," exclaimed the baroness, impetuously; "you do not intend to encourage advances from the Moulinet family. What is there in common between this person and you? He is one of the vulgarest of men, and his daughter, I forewarn you, is one of the most dangerous little pests on the face of the earth. These parvenus expect to purchase acquaintances as they have done their chateau, with their millions. I hope you will resist this invasion of your chateau."

"I think, *chère amie*," said the baron, quietly; "that your aunt knows how to act and does not need your advice."

The marchioness shook her head hesitatingly. Evidently she was much annoyed. Her indolent nature held in abhorrence all complications and difficulties. Turning to her daughter who had remained silent as though indifferent to the point in dispute:

"What do you think, Claire?"

"I think, mother," she replied, quietly, "that it would be rather difficult to refuse ourselves to Monsieur and Mademoiselle Moulinet without some pretext. We cannot plead absence, for they have seen them all playing in the court, and ourselves at the window. Simply to decline receiving them would be to respond by a discourtesy to what was intended as a politeness—which I think unworthy of us. We will admit them to-day, and let that be the end of it. Do you not agree with me?"

"Yes, my child, you are right. Octave, say that we will receive them."

In another moment, M. and Mlle. Moulinet were ushered into the grand salon.

In every woman there is the making of an actress. Despite the keenness of her emotion and the rapid beatings of her heart, Athenaïs got over the first embarrassment by advancing with animated smiles and throwing her arms around Mlle. de Beaulieu as though she had been her dearest friend, exclaiming:

"Ah! my dear Claire, how happy I am to see you!"

Mlle. de Beaulieu's astonishment at this effusion was so great that, despite her customary presence of mind, she could find not a word to say. Meanwhile Athenaïs turned toward the marchioness, and bowing with modest deference:

"It is a great pleasure to me, Madame the Marchioness, to find myself a near neighbor of Mademoiselle de Beaulieu. Since I have known her, and it has been long," she added with the most affectionate smile to Claire, "I have made it my rule to imitate her. And I think it would be difficult to find a more perfect model."

"To imitate me only?" said Claire, quietly. "You are modest."

"And for the first time," murmured the baroness, who approached.

On seeing Mme. de Préfont, Athenaïs' joy appeared to know no bounds. But Mlle. de Moulinet did not risk throwing her arms around the uncertain Sophie. She had too often in former days been wounded by her little hands, and for aught she knew it might result in an open affront which would overturn her well-constructed projects, and snap all the threads of her skillfully twisted woof. So the prudent Athenaïs contented herself with a vigorous hand-shaking that made her bracelets rattle, disguising this comparative coolness by the excess of her affectionate protestations. This was a double pleasure! her dear d'Hennecourt also! Not having been invited to her marriage, she thought fit to ignore it, and to give Sophie her maiden name. The latter put a stop to this adroit equivocation by presenting the baron, whereupon Athenaïs gracefully complimented him upon his fortunate choice.

Maneuvering over this battle-field, strewn with obstacles and ambuscades, with the skill and self-possession of a consummate tactician, Mlle. Moulinet paralyzed her adversaries by her audacity, stupefied her father, and gave all present a high conception of her cleverness. Sophie and Claire saw in her an enemy much more formidable than they could have anticipated. In the course of two years she had developed surprisingly. In person she was quite pretty, rather short, with a tendency to *embonpoint* which lent her a deceiving but attractive air of nonchalance, with jet-black hair and expressive blue eyes. Her hands were gloved with *peau de Suède* reaching as high as the ruches of her tight elbow sleeves, while her very short dress revealed feet the clumsiness of which betrayed her plebeian origin. On a close view she was rather vulgar, but a first glance would have disposed one to pronounce her pleasing.

Moulinet confided to himself in silent ecstasy that his daughter was incontestably a superior young lady and a born duchess. In the excess of his admiration he became quite affected. Could his

poor deceased wife have seen Athenaïs, how delighted and astonished would she have been; and his conjugal emotion brought a tear into the eye of the former judge of the Tribunal de Commerce, which he wiped away undisguisedly, drawing forth a handkerchief the size of a napkin. A terrible glance from Athenaïs recalled him to a sense of his situation, and gave him to understand that in this world which he had entered every thing was to be done with moderation.

Bending toward the marchioness and holding his hat on his heart:

"Mademoiselle de Beaulieu and madame," he said, designating the baroness, "were schoolmates of my daughter at the Sacre Cœur. I have always congratulated myself, and now more than ever, upon having placed her in this establishment—the best in Paris—where young girls may receive a first-class education, and form advantageous associations."

The marchioness smiled. "So I observe," she said, with a shade of irony which was quite lost upon the manufacturer, but which made Athenaïs turn pale with impotent rage.

"As for myself," continued Moulinet, encouraged, "I am grateful for your kindness in permitting me to pay my compliments to you. It was due to you on various grounds, first as a new comer to this neighborhood where I have purchased an estate—a very considerable estate—Varenne, of the D'Estrelles. Not that I particularly desired it, but my daughter, who understands these things, assured me that, with a fortune like mine, an estate was necessary. And let me acknowledge to you, madame, that while in opinions I am liberal, as to relations I am thoroughly an aristocrat."

And Moulinet, filliping the lapel of his white waistcoat with eighteenth-century grace, addressed an ingratiating smile around the room.

The stupendous *bêtise* of the former Judge de commerce quite overcame Athenaïs who sank into a chair with a sigh. The marchioness united the tact of the accomplished hostess with the veiled contempt of the high-born dame. Not willing for Moulinet to perceive the impression he had made, but unable to forego the satisfaction of letting fly a few well-pointed epigrams,

"Be assured, monsieur," she said, "that I fully appreciate the sentiments expressed by you with such frank simplicity. They are worthy of a man whose intelligence has achieved for him the position he holds."

Charmed with the compliment, and discovering no covert irony in it, Moulinet assigned to the marchioness a very exalted place in his estimation, and promised himself to be marked in his attentions to her. He saw their future relations already traced out.

"I am just what you see me," he exclaimed, "and if my character pleases you, Madame the Marchioness, I hope we shall find it agreeable to be good neighbors."

The baroness, unable longer to contain herself, rose, and leading Philippe to an embrasure of the window, vented her feelings by muttering:

"That man is a monster!"

As for Moulinet, seeing that he was producing an impression, and quite unconscious of the nature of it, he launched out freely:

"Varenne is a very large estate; you are familiar with the château,

no doubt? It is historic, you know. My chamber they tell me was occupied by the Emperor Charles V. Yes, Madame the Marchioness, I sleep on an imperial bed."

And with a modest gesture the former judge added:

"And, mon Dieu! I am none the prouder for that!"

Athenaïs could contain herself no longer. She saw that her father would in a few minutes compromise her game, and rising suddenly she said with compressed lips and in a hard voice:

"Papa, ask Madame the Marchioness to show you the beautiful terrace of the château; the view is superb, I am told."

And to cut short the paternal outpourings she turned toward the door. The marchioness rose, indicating the way to Moulinet, and the rest of the guests followed. As Claire, who was last, was about setting her foot on the first step, feeling vaguely conscious that a catastrophe was impending, she found herself confronting Athenaïs, who had adroitly separated from the rest, and was returning toward the salon. They exchanged glances, that of Claire astonished and questioning, that of Athenaïs grave and ominous.

"Let us remain, will you?" said Mlle. Moulinet, moving a step toward the salon.

"Certainly," said Mlle. de Beaulieu, "you wish to speak to me?"

With the certainty that the critical moment had come, Claire's self-possession and energy returned. Her splendid figure was drawn up to its full height, and mistress of herself she awaited the attack of her enemy.

"You cannot doubt the pleasure it is to me to find myself your neighbor," said Athenaïs, without replying to Mlle. de Beaulieu's question. "In the years that have passed since we parted I have gained much experience, and my feelings have greatly modified. We were not precisely good friends formerly."

Claire knit her brow and made a gesture of haughty protestation.

"Oh! it is useless to deny it," exclaimed Athenaïs, quickly. "I had no love for you, I was jealous of you. My present position gives me the right to speak frankly, without any affectation of humility. But I had an instinctive admiration for you, and cherished a dream of becoming your equal."

"My equal! grand Dieu!" said Claire with a smile, "the equal of so insignificant a person as I! You surpass me, I assure you, by far. Judge yourself with more fairness! Beauty, elegance, luxury, you have everything—"

"Everything, it is true," said Athenaïs, quietly, "except a title."

"But," resumed Claire, "in these days that is a thing to be bought. Every thing—small, medium, and great—has its price. If rank is what you wish, you may promise yourself the very best. Your means admit of it."

"Precisely," replied Athenaïs, with an effort to steady her voice, which began to shake a little. "And at this very time a marriage is being arranged for me."

"Ah! that is charming! Let me congratulate you."

"I wanted something else from you than congratulations."

"What?" asked Claire in astonishment.

"Advice."

"Advice! and about what?"

"The choice I am to make."

"Really! you overwhelm me. To ask my advice on your family affairs! I assure you, you quite embarrass me, considering the extent of our acquaintance. Can you not dispense with my suffrage?"

"It is impossible," replied Athenaïs, gravely.

"I do not understand," said Claire, perplexed.

"Listen to me," resumed Mlle. Moulinet, "the subject is worth your attention. The marriage proposed for me is a very great marriage, one quite surpassing my condition and prospects. It is a crown that is in question."

"Royal?" asked Claire, with a smile.

"No, ducal only," replied Athenaïs, looking straight and fixedly into her rival's eyes. "It would make me a duchess."

Mlle. de Beaulieu started. A veil seemed suddenly torn from her eyes. In an instant the truth which her friends had withheld from her flashed upon her mind. She did not for an instant doubt that Athenaïs spoke of Gaston. His absence, his silence—everything—was explained. All the blood rushed to her heart, her face turned deathly white, and a half suppressed sigh died away on her lips.

Athenaïs watched the effects of this sudden shock with a frenzy of delight, reveling in Claire's tortures, and counting each throb of her temples. In an instant she had retaliated on the proud girl all the humiliation she had been enduring for a quarter of an hour. Seeing her motionless, as if turned to stone, Athenaïs feared she would faint and thus escape from her, and the second half of her cruel confidence had yet to be imparted.

"You do not inquire the name of my betrothed?" she said to Claire, whose eyes were settled in a fixed stare, and her ears filled with buzzing sounds.

"No," stammered Mlle. de Beaulieu, quite unconscious what she said.

"It is necessary that you should know," she resumed. And choosing well the time to strike, she added:

"It is the Duke de Bligny."

Claire expected it; her illusions had vanished, she had arrived at a certainty of the duke's treachery. Nevertheless this name of Bligny which was to have been hers, thus uttered by Athenaïs, caused her to start painfully. She remained silent, not daring to hear the altered sound of her own voice, with trembling hands, and parched lips, drinking to its dregs the bitter draught of her lost illusions.

"Monsieur de Bligny is your relative," Athenaïs went on, exasperated by her rival's impassibility. "I have even heard that there was some marriage project between you, and I wished—you will understand me now?—to notify you frankly and consult you."

In this false show of generosity, Mlle. de Beaulieu seemed to see a glimmering of hope. Perhaps, after all, things had not gone so far as she had been led to suppose. Her courage revived, and with it a determination to defend herself to the last.

"To consult me?" she said. "About what?"

"As to the duke's true position with regard to you," replied Mlle. Moulinet, good-naturedly. "If it is true that you were pledged to each other you might accuse me of robbing you of your lover.

The duke has asked me in marriage, but for my part I do not love him. I hardly know him indeed. Let us see. Be frank with me! Do you love him? Would my marriage with him wound, or even displease you? Say a word and I promise to break it."

Perhaps had Claire courageously confessed her love, Athenaïs would have permitted herself the supreme satisfaction of playing the rôle of generosity, and would have foregone her project of ambition. But of all that Mlle. Moulinet had said, Claire retained but one phrase: "The duke has asked me in marriage." A burning flush overspread her brow, and ready to die sooner than acknowledge her love, by a well-nigh miraculous effort of will, she commanded her features and voice, and assumed an air of tranquil indifference.

"I thank you," she said, with a cold smile, "but I am not a woman to be abandoned and disdained. Had the duke been engaged to me, do not fancy that he would marry another. We were children together and cousins, a childish affair naturally follows, you understand, but reason comes and the exigencies of life overturn these projects. The duke, you say, has asked your hand? Accept him, you are worthy of each other.

Athenaïs turned pale at the irony of the last words in which Claire had retaliated on her all that she had been suffering. These two enemies, whose warfare was disguised under forms of the most exquisite politeness, exchanged smiles of mortal hate. It was a combat with golden pins that pierced the flesh sharp and murderous as poniards; woman's warfare of refined science and skillfully directed attacks, in which victory is likely to leave both combatants with cruel wounds.

"This marriage, then, is not displeasing to you?" resumed Mlle. Moulinet, infusing her subtlest venom into the wounds she had made. "I am delighted! Think what a dream for me! Your relative, your equal in very truth, a duchess!"

"All of which you richly deserve," said Claire with profound irony.

"Let me embrace you!" cried Athenaïs, clasping Claire's neck as though she would devour her. Mlle. de Beaulieu made no resistance, and Athenaïs pressed on her cheek a kiss, the most hypocritical that ever woman gave. Then regarding her gravely:

"Be assured," she said, "that you have in me a sincere and devoted friend."

Claire had strength left to reply:

"You have just given proof of it."

Then with trembling limbs she sunk back on the sofa.

Fortunately the baroness, uneasy in the absence of the two girls, and suspecting some foul play on Athenaïs' part, had gone in search of them. On entering the room, and seeing at a glance Claire pale and crushed, and Athenaïs erect and radiant, she guessed what had passed.

"What are you two doing shut up here?" And bending over Claire: "What is the matter?" she asked.

Mlle. de Beaulieu replied by a heart-piercing glance in the direction of her rival, who was drawing on her gloves with the coolness of a duellist, who had just destroyed his adversary.

This supplicating appeal for aid quite overcame the baroness. A hot flame rose to her head, her little ears grew fiery red, and with a threatening gesture she pointed Mlle. Moulinet to the door:

"Go!"

Athenaïs, with great presence of mind, affected not to understand the insult:

"Yes, I am going to rejoin my father on the terrace," she said. And turning to Claire:

"I hope we shall meet soon."

And deliberately, as though quitting of her own free will a battle-field on which the victory was hers, she left the salon.

CHAPTER VIII.

HARDLY had Mlle. Moulinet quitted them, when Claire sprung toward the baroness, the fury which she needed no longer to restrain sparkling in her eyes.

"You knew he was going to be married? Why did you not tell me?"

As Mme. de Préfont remained speechless: "Betrayed! abandoned!" she went on, wringing her hands in a paroxysm of despair. "And for her, for this girl! And you have suffered me to learn it from her own lips, you have permitted her to deal me a blow like this! You are then her accomplices! Not one of you loves me!"

"Claire, for mercy's sake," exclaimed the baroness, "you frighten me!"

But the impetuosity of Mlle. de Beaulieu's character, so long held under restraint, broke forth with irrepressible violence. The efforts she had made over herself during that horrible interview seemed to her now like cowardly weakness. She wondered why she had not flung in the face of the girl who had so impudently reveled in her tortures all the insults that had sprung to her lips. She regretted that she had not struck and wounded her. Her revolt was the frenzied outburst of the exasperated plebeian robbed of her lover, storming and raging utterly regardless of the restraints which society imposes. The blood of the old barons with their right to high and low justice was boiling in the veins of Mlle. de Beaulieu. She dreamed of cruel and ignominious tortures for her rival. But a sense of her impotence rushed over her, and prostrated her anew. She saw her hopes forever fled and all thought of revenge forbidden her. With suddenly relaxed nerves, she sunk sobbing and weeping into the arms of the baroness, exclaiming: "Ah! how wretched—how wretched I am!"

Mme. de Préfont drew Claire's head down on her shoulder and gently, as a mother soothes a troubled child, sought to restore calmness to this imbittered heart. Claire wept extravagantly. The tears washed away the venom with which Athenaïs had infected the wound and softened the keenness of its anguish. She blushed at the recollection of the transport to which she had given way, and, by a supreme effort of will, succeeded in regaining the mastery over herself, so that when her mother entered the salon, terrified by a naïve

confidence which Moulinet had just imparted, she found Claire, if not resigned—resignation was impossible—at least calm and courageous.

The marchioness, quite out of breath, both from her recent excitement and from the rapidity with which she had ascended the steps, stood speechless before Claire, who was still pale and trembling, and after seeking in vain for some word, which, in her agitation, would not come, threw her arms around her daughter's neck, groaning:

"Ah! mon Dieu; my poor child!"

"You know it, mother?" asked Claire, a few tears again gathering in her eyes.

"Her father has this instant told me! And to think," she added, throwing up her arms in indignation, "that it was you, who to avoid showing them a discourtesy, wished me to receive them."

"I am rewarded, am I not?" said Claire bitterly. "I was imprudent; I should have shunned this person, understanding as I did her sentiments toward me. If we formerly caused her humiliations, how she has avenged them! She has never pardoned! She has been waiting for the propitious moment to strike to the heart the happiest of her old companions. She has destroyed my life! I can never recover from this abandonment, and if, after such a humiliation, I could be insane enough to think of marrying, who would want me now?"

"Who!" exclaimed the marchioness with animation, "all who have eyes to see and ears to hear. My dear child, if any one is injured by this, it is not you, but the duke, and should it please you to marry, you would only be embarrassed whom to choose. Within the past six months I have declined overtures from noble families, and those who asked your hand showed too much regret at their refusal to have changed their views so quickly."

Claire made a gesture of dissent.

"After the Duke de Bligny, mother, I could marry only a man who was quite superior to him or one whom I might love. My only vindication in the eyes of the world would be in the ambition or the infatuation of my choice. But you must know that it is impossible. After such a deception a girl in my position can wed only the convent."

"The convent! Indeed! And ourselves? No, you are too young to despair. With your endowments the future must have in reserve for you a sure revenge. Even here—not far off—is a man who would accept your hand on his knees."

Mlle. de Beaulieu elevating her brows, turned toward her mother.

"Monsieur Derblay?" she said simply.

"Monsieur Derblay, yes," replied the marchioness. "I mention him only to reassure you. Who could approach you and not love you? Shall we go to Paris? Will you go to Switzerland with Monsieur and Madame de Préfont? Speak, I am ready for anything that will gratify or console you. What do you want?"

"Ah! do I know?" cried Claire, with abandon. "I want to disappear instantly, to fly from everybody and from myself. I hate and despise everything alike. Alas! why can I not die?"

"Death, my dear child, is the only evil for which there is no

remedy. If all the women who have been betrayed by lover or husband should die, the world would be depopulated. There are few men who are constant; if they do not deceive you before marriage they do after."

As though the marchioness in speaking of unfaithful men had evoked the faithless one who had caused so many sighs and tears, a furious gallop was suddenly heard, and the Duke de Bligny on a white horse covered with foam, dashed into the court through the open gate, dismounted rapidly, and tossing the bridle to a petrified valet, ascended the steps, four at a time, and was about hurrying without ceremony to the salon, when he was met in the vestibule by the baron and Bachelin. His features were pale and drawn, and he suffered them to close the passage to him without resistance.

"Are Monsieur and Mademoiselle Moulinet still here?" he asked, huskily. As the baron answered affirmatively: "And my aunt? I must see the marchioness immediately. Perhaps it is not yet too late?"

"You mistake, my dear sir," replied the baron, understanding the cause of the duke's precipitation. "It is too late, Monsieur and Mademoiselle Moulinet have spoken."

The duke, with a sigh, sunk down on one of the tall sculptured benches of the vestibule, and looked at the two men with a countenance full of distress.

"What can I do to repair the mischief that has been done?" he asked.

"It is, alas, irreparable, Monsieur the Duke," replied Bachelin in a tone of respectful reproach. "The best you can now do is to withdraw without making any attempt to see Mademoiselle de Beaulieu."

"That I will never consent to," the duke said, rising quickly, "I cannot remain under the imputation which my aunt will cast upon me. I must speak to her and assure her that I have had no hand in this infamy."

Despite their unfavorable prepossessions, the baron and Bachelin were touched by the grief expressed in the duke's countenance.

"So be it," said Bachelin, "Monsieur the Baron will remain with you while I ascertain whether the marchioness will yield to your entreaties."

Not suspecting the violent state of agitation into which the household whose guests they were, had been thrown, Philippe, Moulinet, Suzanne, Athenaïs, and the marquis were talking quietly together on the terrace. The setting sun made a band of crimson on the green-tinted blue sky, a delicious calm overhung the valley whose depths already lay in shadow. The clock of the Pont-Avesnes church, sounded clear and melancholy in the distance, announcing a mass for the dead. All nature was enveloped in a peace so profound, that under its influence, Athenaïs' feelings became less bitter, and satisfied with the completeness of her triumph she felt in a mood to spare her rival future annoyance.

Upon seeing the duke dash into the court at full speed, Claire had started up astonished and alarmed. She attempted to speak, but words failed her and she could only stammer disjointedly, laughing nervously and pointing toward the window. She seemed about to

go mad. Her lips were white and she shivered convulsively. The marchioness and the baroness, frightened, rushed toward her, and apprehending a fainting fit were about to call for assistance when Claire, with an imperious gesture, stopped them. With a great effort over herself, she succeeded in breathing through her tightly clinched teeth:

"Do not call! I will recover myself."

She sunk back on a chair. The baroness wiped away the cold perspiration which had gathered on her brow. The marchioness tore off her woolen fichu and shawl and enveloped in them her shivering daughter. A moment of anxiety passed in which Claire, with her head bent forward, remained in a sort of stupor, the one deep wrinkle between her brows made by an absorbing thought and her glistening eyes riveted upon a single flower of the carpet, which she did not see, alone indicating that she was awake. In a few minutes the color returned to her cheeks. She sighed, and with a sudden movement threw aside the wrappings.

The sound of the glass door opened by Bachelin caused her to turn her head. She did not choose that her sufferings should be betrayed, and turned a smiling face to the notary who was approaching Mme. de Beaulieu on tiptoe as if the room had been the chamber of an invalid, and bowing lower than usual, as though ashamed of the mission with which he was charged:

"Madame the Marchioness will pardon me, but what has happened is so extraordinary—"

"I know," interrupted the marchioness, abruptly, "the duke is here. Well?"

"And madame," continued the notary, "he insists upon seeing you in spite of all that can be said."

"Such insolence on his part is amazing," said the marchioness, with unaccustomed vivacity, drawing herself up, and turning toward the door.

"Where are you going, mother?" asked Claire.

"To send him away from here, as he deserves," replied the marchioness, flushing with indignation.

Claire was silent a moment, as if debating with herself. Then shaking her head:

"No, mother, we must not send the Duke de Bligny away, we must receive him."

"Receive him!" repeated the marchioness, petrified, questioning whether her daughter's senses had not deserted her.

"Yes, and with a good countenance. I would not have him imagine I have suffered from his abandonment. Anything rather than his insulting pity! Receive him! We may well open our door to him since we have not closed it to his fiancée!"

"But what are you going to do?" asked Mme. de Beaulieu, uneasily.

"Avenge myself!" replied Claire. And turning to Bachelin: "Be so kind as to request the duke to wait on the terrace for a while; you will invite him in when I beckon to you from the window. And send Monsieur Derblay to me."

The baroness and the marchioness exchanged glances of bewilderment. But Bachelin, with more insight, divining the success of

his combinations, disappeared with youthful agility. In another instant Philippe entered.

"You and mother leave me awhile, Sophie, dear. I have something to say to Monsieur Derblay."

Mme. de Beaulieu and the baroness retired into the embrasure of a window, to await in perplexity the close of the interview. Philippe, forwarned by a word from Bachelin, and understanding that this second involved his destiny, stood in silence before the girl he loved.

"Monsieur," she said, addressing him directly for the first time, "our old friend and counselor has informed my mother that you have done me the honor to aspire to my hand."

Philippe bowed assent.

"I believe you to be a worthy man," continued Mlle. de Beaulieu, resolutely; "I conclude that before forming such a project, you, as well as others, knew that the Duke de Bligny had abandoned me."

"Yes, mademoiselle, I knew it," Philippe articulated with difficulty. "And be assured that at this moment were it in my power to insure your happiness by restoring the duke to you, I would not hesitate, though it were at the price of my life."

"Thank you," said Claire, "but all ties between us are at an end, in proof of which, if your sentiments remain the same, I am ready to bestow on you my hand."

Her voice faltered as she spoke the last words, and Philippe guessed rather than heard them. There flashed across his mind a recollection of the day when his sister, seeing him sad and dispirited, had said: "You will see, she will come to you herself and ask you to be her husband." Suzanne's prophecy was fulfilled. Her affection had given her the prescience of her brother's happiness. It had not been a dream—it was true; Claire herself had offered him her hand. A great joy filled his heart, and raising the lovely hand to his lips, in his icy fingers, he touched it lightly with the most timid and delicious of kisses.

"I have a favor to ask of you, monsieur," resumed Claire. "I wish you to let it be understood that we have been engaged for several days. I do not need to explain to you the motives of this deception; it is born of my pride. You, alas, are under no illusions respecting the state of my heart, but you have my promise to be a true and faithful wife. Leave me now, but do not go away. I may need you."

As Philippe moved off, she signed to Bachelin to introduce the duke. The notary had skillfully occupied the attention of De Bligny during the few moments that the interview had lasted. As he was opening to him the door leading to the terrace, they met Philippe returning from the salon with a radiant face.

Moulinet and Athenaïs had been petrified at the arrival of the duke. Napoleon looking for Grouchy and perceiving the advance guard of Blucher, was not more overwhelmed than was the daughter of the former Judge de Commerce. The duke at Beaulieu at this critical moment threatened the utmost danger to her combinations. Was she to suffer a disastrous and humiliating defeat in the very moment of her triumph? What would be the result of the meeting between Gaston and Claire? Had the cards been sufficiently mixed to make a reconciliation impossible? Or would the lovers in a single glance

be restored to each other, and exchange in one supreme embrace solemn and irrevocable vows?

Moulinet, too, had been greatly astonished, but his ideas had not traveled so far as his clear-sighted daughter's. He wondered why the duke had not waited at Varenne, but he had no suspicion of the cause that had hurried him to Beaulieu. He advanced to meet his son-in-law, extending his hand to him with a gracious smile, and was annihilated by the glance which Gaston flashed upon him as he passed on without so much as a bow to Athenaïs. He followed him, however, toward the salon.

In an instant the marchioness and the baroness had arranged a *mise-en-scène*, and when De Bligny entered, he found his aunt ensconced, as usual, in her easy-chair, the baroness standing before the fire with her arms crossed, that the duke might not offer her a hand as it was his habit to do. Mlle. de Beaulieu sat between her mother and the baroness, and her back being turned toward the light to conceal the alteration of her features, it was the coil of golden hair that first met his eyes. He shivered in spite of himself, and was on the eve of rushing forward and falling at Claire's feet, reckless of consequences, but the cold, severe look of the marchioness arrested him, and instead of doing so, he bowed profoundly to the woman who had been a mother to him:

"You perceive, Madame the Marchioness," he said, speaking disjointedly, "my grief—my agitation—my regret— On arriving at Varenne, at Monsieur—" the duke was ashamed to pronounce Moulinet's name. "I learned the unbecoming step which—"

"But, Monsieur the Duke," interrupted the former judge, visibly piqued. The duke turned upon his future father-in-law with an air of majestic disdain.

"An inconceivable step, and one which I wish publicly to disavow. Upon my word of honor, I am innocent of having authorized this affront to my family."

"It was a simple visit of courtesy," muttered Moulinet, subdued by the duke's vehemence, "I do not comprehend—"

"You do not comprehend!" interrupted the duke with withering contempt. "That is your sole excuse!"

But Moulinet was too thoroughly infatuated with himself to submit to be browbeaten even by a man whom he regarded as of a superior essence. He assumed an air of dignity, and bowing gravely:

"If I am guilty of any wrong toward you, son in-law, I beg you to explain it. I am prepare to make reparation for it."

The word son-in-law raised the duke's irritation to its utmost pitch. This time he silenced the former judge effectually with an: "Enough, monsieur!" stinging as the lash of a horsewhip. Then for the first time since his entrance, venturing to look at Claire, who kept her seat, imperturbably:

"I owe you explanations, aunt; suffer me to make them. And you, Claire, I will not leave the room until you assure me of your forgiveness."

At these words, addressed personally to herself, Claire rose proudly, and looking with marvelous calmness at her old lover, said:

"You have no explanations to make, duke, and no need of par-

don. You are to marry, I am informed, the daughter of Monsieur ——," and the tone of the last words conveyed volumes of impertinence. "You have the right so to do, I believe. Were you less free than myself?"

The duke, as he listened, asked himself whether or not he was dreaming. He looked at Claire, at the baroness, and at his aunt, and saw them all quiet and unmoved. Had Mlle. de Beaulieu become estranged from him during this year which he had employed so fatally?

"Your betrothed brought me herself the happy intelligence," pursued Claire. "It was well, and I do not wish to be behindhand with you."

Moving to the window, she beckoned to Philippe. Athenaïs, devoured with curiosity, followed the iron-master, and in another moment all the guests were assembled in the salon.

"I wish to present you to each other, gentlemen," she said, with perfect *sang froid*. "Monsieur the Duke de Bligny, my cousin," she said to Philippe. And turning full upon Gaston: "Monsieur Derblay, my betrothed."

A bombshell bursting in their midst would not have been more startling than was this announcement to the assemblage. The duke staggered, Athenaïs was seized with vertigo, and her ruddy face changed to ash color; the baron and baroness exchanged glances of astonishment. Bachelin and Suzanne only, showed no symptoms of surprise. The notary, because he had secretly planned this dénouement; Suzanne, because in her adoration of her brother, she had never doubted that Mlle. de Beaulieu must end by yielding to the irresistible merit of Philippe.

The duke proved that his practice of diplomacy had not been useless to him. He replied promptly, with a gracious smile to M. Derblay.

"Accept my compliments, sir," he said, in a voice which was tolerably steady; "you will marry a woman of whom few of us are worthy."

Confounded though she was at this startling reprisal on the part of Mlle. de Beaulieu, Athenaïs understood that she must put a good face on it. She advanced in her turn, and looking fixedly at Claire:

"My warmest congratulations," she said; and added, in an undertone, with a perfidious smile: "It is a love marriage!"

Mlle. de Beaulieu shuddered, as suddenly all the horror of her position flashed upon her. The man she loved was there-- before her— and was soon to take leave of her in company with her rival. The unexpected revelation which had been made to him having dissipated his wrath, he was talking apart with Athenaïs, laughing with the careless unconcern of a happy man. And she, by an impulse of her indomitable pride, had decided her destiny, surrendered her liberty. She was pledged to a man she could not love, for her heart was filled with the sad memory of another. With a look of mortal anguish, she glanced toward the duke; she felt a strong impulse to walk up to him and carry him away from the pointed and exaggerated coquetries of Athenaïs, and tell him all the truth. But she saw him calm, careless, indifferent, and a return of anger and pride preserved her from the weakness. A reckless determination to avoid the ap-

pearance of abandonment, and to save her *amour propre* at any price, triumphed over every other feeling; for this she felt ready to sacrifice her whole future, and with an exultant glance at De Bligny and Mlle. Moulinet, she murmured: "I will be married first!"

CHAPTER IX.

Preparations for the marriage went on with incredible rapidity. It seemed as if all the inmates of Beaulieu and of Pont-Avesnes had rendered themselves Claire's accomplices. Philippe suddenly departed for Berry in quest of the needful papers, and the marquis at the same time set out for Paris. Post and telegraph vied with each other in stirring up the tradespeople, and an animated bustle succeeded to the quiet in which the marchioness had lived for a year past. The worthy lady, quite stunned by the march of events, accepted her daughter's sudden determination without remonstrance. Confiding in the favorable representations which Bachelin had made to her, and touched also by the delicacy of the iron-master's conduct, she saw the arrangements for the marriage with more surprise than concern. She would have preferred that Claire should have waited and have chosen a husband in her own sphere, but after all, would a man who possessed rank and fortune consent in this practical age to marry Mlle. de Beaulieu without a dowry? The answer seemed doubtful enough to lead her to look upon the meeting with M. Derblay at this critical moment as a rare good fortune.

Claire spared no effort to lull to rest any scruples which her mother might entertain. She assumed a smiling face, and wore an air of entire satisfaction. Only the baroness knew the secret of her anguish and regrets. She would pass whole days shut up in her chamber, extended on a long chair in a state of physical and mental prostration, going over in her mind the cruel circumstances of her rupture with the duke. What had she done to bring upon her such a misfortune? Nothing. All sprung from the hatred of her rival and the baseness of her lover. She was the innocent victim of an unrelenting hatred, the martyr to implacable destiny, and she began devising in her mind schemes of vengeance. Life she thought was simply a battlefield, on which to protect oneself from being wounded it was necessary to be steeled against contempt and armed with audacity. She vowed to shrink from nothing to reach her end. She grew implacable, malevolent. Nothing remained of the once noble, generous, tender-hearted Claire. She taught herself to be hard and selfish, to be ready to sacrifice anything to her own pleasure. The consuming fire of her grief seemed to have withered her heart. Even her beauty had changed, had grown marble like. It had the coldness and the majesty of a statue.

As she thought over her future she traced out her line of conduct. Her indifference to M. Derblay was profound. She felt not the least gratitude for the iron-master's generosity, his compliances she attributed solely to his ambition to become her husband. How should he not agree to anything to marry a girl so rich, and to enter a family so noble? She even felt a disdain for the facility with which he had lent himself to the humiliating comedy played before the

duke. Thus Philippe's noble generosity in Claire's eyes became baseness. At least she would find in him a compliant husband, one whom she could manage without difficulty, and that was precisely what she desired. If M. Derblay would show himself docile she would interest herself in him, would bring to bear all the influence at her command on his behalf, would charge herself with his future and ensure his advancement. The importance of the station which he would occupy would make amends for his want of birth; and, after all, it was the century of *parvenus*.

The little baroness, uneasy at the terrible calmness with which her cousin prepared for a union which was not one to be entered into wantonly, made an attempt to penetrate her thoughts. She plied her with a number of questions, shifting her ground from one point to another, seeking to cover their seriousness under her usual air of lightness and gayety. Claire tried to affect indifference, but the better words that sprang to her lips betrayed the cruel wound that was still bleeding in the bottom of her heart. While admiring her courage and spirits, the baroness could not refrain from misgivings as to the result of the step she had resolved to take. With three years' experience of married life she recognized the gravity of Claire's conduct, and made an effort to prevail upon her to look at things in their real aspect. But she came in conflict with an invincible will. Claire had promulgated for her own use a sort of law of retaliation. She had suffered through others, others might suffer through her. So much the worse for them if they were innocent. Was she guilty? Since injustice was the rule of humanity, regret and duty were no concern of hers, she would trample upon anything to effect her purposes. To her thought, human beings had come to be the mere mediums of actions. She had made up her mind to move them like pawns on a chessboard, with the sole end of winning the game. To be even with Athenaïs and to humiliate the duke were objects to be pursued regardless of consequences, and the first victim was to be the generous and devoted Philippe, who was longing to restore to the woman he adored the peace and happiness she had lost.

Claire's despotic intentions were severely censured by Mme. de Préfont. The cruel confounding of the just and the unjust made by her to the profit of her egotism, appeared to her cousin so insensate that she set it down to a temporary madness, for which time would bring a cure. She gave her friend to understand, however, that this projected tyranny might prove less easy than she supposed. True, it was no doubt that it had flattered M. Derblay to enter the Beaulieu family, and that he would not be disposed to count that a sacrifice to which he owed the honor of a marriage with Claire. Her hand was the price of the service he had rendered her in enabling her to confound her enemies in the very moment when they supposed her humbled and defeated. But what future was she going to create for him? And how would it be, if, when coming to his wife with open arms and words of tenderness he found her grave and cold? He had sought her, as she thought, from ambition; but might it not have been from love? Even in this age, when speculation has the chief share in matrimonial contracts, there were husbands who loved their wives. Might not M. Derblay belong to the number of these phenomena? In marriage woman was seldom the

sovereign, and men were for the most part inclined to domineer. If M Derblay, who appeared also to know very well what he wanted, should revolt against the plans she had arranged, what would result from the conflict of the two wills? It was not a question of a partnership for a few hours, of a comedy to be performed in five minutes. A whole existence was involved in it, and it might turn to a tragedy if one were not careful. Perhaps it would be better to pause before it was too late.

But to all this reasoning Mlle. de Beaulieu remained insensible. She was prepared to encounter any risk sooner than forego her projects. She wished to appear to abandon the duke, she had resolved to be married before him, the day was fixed, and nothing could hinder her. But she perceived that she had been imprudent in suffering the baroness to read her thoughts, and resolved for the future to be more circumspect. She relaxed the hard contracted muscles of her face, taught herself to smile, and playfully compassionated poor M. Derblay, who was condemned to the sad duty of marrying a girl like her, and who would hardly find in the alliance advantages enough to compensate for the capricious tyrannical humor of his wife. The baroness was taken in the snare, and began to consider that time only was needed to dispel Claire's gloom and soften her irritation. She said to herself also that marriage subdues the most violent characters, that once alone with her husband the most recalcitrant must be brought to reason. A man who is not a fool and who is very much in love may greatly modify a woman's ideas. And should maternity ensue, the whole situation changes and the tigress becomes a lamb.

These reflections reassured the baroness. Moreover it was not in her nature to follow long the same idea, and having been serious and penetrating for one day, she had a return of frivolousness for the remainder of the week.

Meanwhile Philippe had returned, bringing with him the wedding ring, a beautiful ruby, encircled with brilliants, and tremblingly requested of Claire permission to place it on her finger. She extended to him her white hand with haughty indifference, and had only a disdainful glance for the princely present, and no word of thanks. The ring was the token of her engagement, and it was odious to her. The next day Philippe saw, with a tight pressure at his heart, that she did not wear it. He dared not say anything. He was so timid before her! But his eyes rested on her hand with a gaze so eloquent that she felt constrained to say:

"You must excuse me, I never wear rings."

The iron-master was reassured. He had fancied he saw in the absence of the jewel a repugnance for everything that reminded her of him. He was well aware of her sentiments toward him, he knew that he had been accepted out of pique, but he felt himself so penetrated by his passion, so overflowing with tenderness that he believed it would be in his power to draw to himself this wounded heart. How could a woman remain insensible to an affection of every instant, attentive, thoughtful, devoted? Disappointed in her hopes, she had retired sorrowfully within herself, but could it be possible for the heart of a girl of twenty, in the full tide of youth, to remain forever impenetrable and frozen, deaf to all the appeals of

life, blind to all the smiles of hope? She believed her heart dead, when it was, in fact, only asleep. Little by little he would awaken it, and teach it to resume its beatings. And for whom, if not for the one who had aroused it from its lethargy? Having saved this soul, would he not have the right to it? And when brought back to life and made to recognize the difference between the affection she had lost and that which she had gained, would she not recompense him by a whole existence of happiness?

Thus mused Philippe during his hours of silent meditation. Absorbed all his life long in the cares of an engrossing business he had had no time to spare for society. He was therefore very timid. With women in general he was much embarrassed, and he never approached Mlle. de Beaulieu without fearful palpitations of the heart. The grave, cold Claire had only to turn her quiet eyes upon him to cause him immediately to lose countenance. While ascending the hill with Suzanne from Pont-Avesnes to Beaulieu he developed to her his plans for the future, the reforms he projected in the interior arrangements of the chateau, and lastly poured into her ears his love for his betrothed. Suzanne listened with a smiling face and sparkling eyes to his glowing words, understanding that he was rehearsing to her the lesson which was to be learned by heart before presenting himself to Claire. And when anxious for approval he turned to her with, "is it not so?" she replied mischievously:

"But it is not to me that all that should be said, Philippe, but to her. I, you know, find everything you say so wise, and everything you do so well done, that I am always of your opinion. But Mademoiselle de Beaulieu—"

"I am going to say it to her to-day," exclaimed the iron-master, resolutely. "Oh! I have much to tell her!"

But when he reached the chateau and found himself in Claire's presence, all his beautiful intrepidity vanished. He stammered when he attempted to say good morning, and took his seat dejectedly apart, wishing it were only in his power by a miracle to open his heart, like a jewel-casket, and display to the young girl all the treasures it contained.

The cold weather had come with the first days of November, and they could no longer disperse as before over the terrace.

Philippe found, in the increased intimacy of the drawing-room, opportunities to talk to more advantage—not of his passion—his lips remained sealed as to all that concerned himself, but on general topics; skillfully seconded by Octave and the baron, he showed the rectitude of his judgments and the solidity of his knowledge.

Claire, seated by her mother in the chimney-corner, with a bright fire blazing on the hearth, bent her head over her embroidery without ever raising her eyes. The peals of laughter which reached them through the open door of the billiard-hall, where the marquis and Suzanne were engaged in an exciting game of parlor-croquet, alone threw a little animation over the picture.

Athenaïs, furious at the miscarriage of her plans, had departed for Paris, taking with her her father and the duke.

Moulinet had returned, to make a parting call, and had been well received by the marchioness.

By Claire's request, she had welcomed the former judge as the

prospective father-in-law of a well-beloved nephew, the mother thus consenting to fill her rôle in the comedy prepared by her outraged daughter.

The Moulinets and the Duke de Bligny were to be made to discard utterly from their minds such a thought as that she, Claire, had been injured by them.

The duke was astonished to find himself so innocent after having believed himself so guilty. Athenaïs admired her rival's strength of mind, but, feeling herself vanquished in the moment when she had deemed herself victor, consoled herself with a promise of terrible reprisals.

Athenaïs' marriage, which had been arranged to be celebrated in the superb chapel at Varenne, it was now decided should take place in Paris. She was aware that the Parisian *bourgeoisie*, whom her father had invited, would not come to the province for the purpose of swelling her cortége, and suspected that the great country families invited by the duke might decline to be represented at her marriage; and she would not risk the chance of a rebuff.

Promising, therefore, to return for the marriage of her future cousin, her "dear Claire," she departed for Paris.

This, at least, was something of a solace to Claire. Her countenance brightened. In the absence of her rival, the air seemed purer. Philippe had employed workmen to restore the apartments at the Pont-Avesnes, which time had defaced, and he profited by the ray of good humor to propose to Mme. de Beaulieu a visit to her daughter's future residence.

The proposition was accepted, and the day following all the inmates of Beaulieu set out in a large break for the Pont-Avesnes.

The impression produced on entering was favorable. Claire was pleased with the large court, planted with old lindens, the stream of water, the trenches filled with fruit trees which surrounded the chateau. The park, with its deep, somber walks, promised her silence and calmness. The solemn gloom of the vast suites of apartments seemed in harmony with her own melancholy.

A habitation so destitute of outlook would have seemed to another a tomb, but Mlle. de Beaulieu found it to her taste.

The baroness explored all the reception-rooms, uttered exclamations of surprise and delight at sight of the ancient riches which Philippe's father had collected. The Louis Fourteenth furniture, in point-work, transported her; she stood in ecstasy before the Beauvais tapestry, representing Alexander's battles. The love of antiquity, which prevails at present, has made of every one who respects himself something of an expert.

The baroness had attended a number of sales, and could value, with surprising accuracy, the sculptured Henry III. gaudrons, and the old Saxony *bonbonières*.

Moving from one salon to another, she prattled on with the vivacity and abandonment of a young parrot, confounding her aunt, who understood not a word of her bric-à-brac phraseology.

Brigitte alone appreciated the enthusiasm of the baroness for the furniture which had been her care, and did justice to the propriety of her praises.

Suzanne and Octave had not even entered the chateau. They had

strolled together through the walks of the French parterre till, suddenly hurrying off to the kitchen, Suzanne returned with an enormous hunch of bread, which they distributed together to the carps.

They had been there for a half hour, amusing themselves with the efforts of the gourmands to carry off a large crust which was swimming on the surface. As for the baron, the proximity to the manufactory had destroyed his freedom of mind, and he had taken a path, which he well knew, leading to the workshops.

Claire had remained in the rear, while the baroness was engaged in making her inventory of the furniture, and Philippe in doing the honors of the house to Mme. de Beaulieu.

A glass door opening upon a flight of stairs led to the park. She opened it, and descended them alone.

In the distance, the hammers of the manufactory rang out gayly on the anvil, the tall, snorting furnaces cast their dense smoke upward. The park was dark, still and mysterious. The noise and the silence formed a seductive contrast. She bent her steps beneath the branches of the great trees, whose leaves were already reddened by the autumn winds, and sauntered along the moss-covered path, losing herself in solemn reverie.

This somber, dreary park seemed to her the very frame she would have chosen to inclose her life. As these dead branches, which she crackled beneath her feet, had been detached from the trees, so had her hopes been severed from her life; they had been scattered to the winds, as she dispersed the dry leaves with her fingers.

All within her was chill and motionless, as were these great, empty, desolate woods. She felt a bitter satisfaction in the increasing melancholy of nature, as she penetrated the gloomy wall.

Suddenly, in a bend of the path, a glimpse of the country rose before her with its fruitful plains spreading out in the far distance, reveling in the sunlight. It was like a tableau suddenly discovered to view.

She had so completely identified herself with her surroundings that the impression it made upon her was startling. In an instant, gayety had succeeded to gloom. After the dreary park, fields rose to view, fertile and full of life.

Should it be thus with her? Could her feelings ever know a change?

She turned away angrily from the smiling landscape, and retreated into the solitude, the gloom, and the shadow, rejecting the promise which the future seemed to be holding out to her.

When the baroness, Philippe, and Mme. de Beaulieu, surprised and a little uneasy at her long absence, started out in search of her, they saw her slowly returning through the silent walk, calm and smiling. Only her eyes, which were still moist with the tears she had secretly shed, betokened that a struggle had been going on in her heart.

The baron, who had torn himself away from his scientific observations, with Suzanne and Octave, left the boat in which they had been plowing the little stream, and, with the marchioness, returned to the carriage, taking Philippe and Suzanne back with them to dinner at Beaulieu.

Only a week now separated Claire and Philippe from the day so earnestly desired by the pride of the one and the love of the other.

As the moment drew near, Claire became more nervous and agitated. It might have been believed she was happy in the marriage she was about to contract, such was her impatience to have it concluded. She seemed to be in dread lest something should supervene at the last moment.

Packages arrived without ceasing by the rail, and the postal service was wearied out. At the chateau, the bells had St. Vitus' dance, and the servants, habituated to the quiet country ways, were in a state of exasperation.

When the time arrived to send out the invitations, Claire announced two resolutions, which stupefied every one. She wished the ceremony to be performed at midnight, and very quietly, in the little church of the Pont-Avesnes, only the family being present.

The marchioness threw up her arms in amazement; the baroness sunk into a chair, and remained for ten minutes speechless; Octave asked if his sister was going mad, while Philippe kept silence.

Without assigning any reasons, Claire maintained her point, and bore unflinchingly the united assaults of her family.

To marry at midnight! That was strange enough; though it was a fashion which still prevailed in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. A black mass! Doubtless Claire looked upon herself as the duke's widow, and this was her mourning!

The midnight marriage might be tolerated, but to invite no one! Claire would appear to be ashamed of her husband; and then it might bring ill luck! This last consideration, which was hazarded by the baroness, had no more weight than the rest.

Philippe decided the question by declaring that whatever Mlle. de Beaulieu desired was excellent in his eyes, and that he saw no inconvenience in gratifying her wishes in every particular. The person chiefly interested offering no objection, the opposition was forced to give way.

The baroness, much vexed—she had ordered a magnificent dress for the occasion—laughingly likened the wedding to the tragic marriages at the Porte Saint-Martin, when a person under sentence of death receives permission of the king to wed his beloved in prison before ascending the scaffold.

The signing of the contract took place the evening before the great day. Bachelin, compelled to choose between his two clients, since he was the notary of both parties, called in one of his brethren of Besançon, and represented himself the noble family for whom his fathers had officiated for centuries. The old practitioner garbled so skillfully the reading of the contract that even had Claire lent an attentive ear to the jargon, she would have been but little enlightened respecting the situation.

She remained, therefore, in entire ignorance of her ruin; and when Bachelin, more agitated than herself, presented the pen to her, she signed, without suspecting it, the deed which made over to her the half of M. Derblay's fortune.

Philippe, the contract once duly signed, felt himself lighter of heart; though he was not thoroughly at his ease until the question

being put by the mayor to Mlle. de Beaulieu: "Do you take Monsieur Philippe Derblay for your husband?" he heard her, in a firm voice, answer, "Yes."

CHAPTER X.

It was nearly one in the morning when Suzanne left the sacristy before the signing was over, and hastened home. She found the faithful Brigitte on her knees, engaged in vigorously blowing into an active blaze the fire burning in a tall chimney-piece of sculptured sandstone.

Hearing the door open, she turned, bellows in hand, and without rising, smiled to Mlle. Derblay:

Well, Mademoiselle Suzanne, are you back already? Is the marriage ended?'

"Perfectly, and entirely as can be; and I have left them with the curé to take a look at matters here. We have a new mistress, Brigitte; we must do our best to please her."

"Mon Dieu! how can she help being pleased as soon as she is with our Philippe? And then, if the bird is pretty, so is the cage."

And she glanced admiringly around on the lofty apartment, with a caressing look at the large arm-chairs, with their carved backs, the credences, the hangings of old Cordova leather, browned by time, shining faintly from out of the shadows. A door, partly open, led into the sleeping chamber, softly lighted by a lamp reflected from the mirrored doors of a superb Louis Sixteenth wardrobe.

"Everything is in order there?" said Suzanne, designating this apartment.

"Everything, I answer for it; I have attended to it all myself. This wedding turns the servants' heads so, nothing can be got out of them, the triflers." With a malicious look at Suzanne: "And to think that in a year or two it will be your turn to set everything topsy-turvy."

"Fortunately nothing of the sort is in question now," said Suzanne, coloring.

"Fortunately! Ah! but who was the pretty gentleman that offered his arm to you as you set off, with such an attentive air?"

"That was Monsieur Octave de Beaulieu," Suzanne replied, affecting to take a turn around the room in order to make her final observations, "Mademoiselle Claire's brother."

"Ah! ah!' said Brigitte, laughing loudly. "It looks to me as if this brideman liked the scent of our orange blossoms."

"Come, *bonne*, you don't know what you are saying," said Suzanne, coloring to the roots of her hair.

The sound of carriage wheels on the sand made a seasonable interruption to Brigitte's prattling. Suzanne hurried to the window. The lanterns shone out in the darkness, and lighted up the dull verdure of the trees.

"Here they are!" she exclaimed, as she moved toward the door.

The baroness, cloaked and hooded as if for an expedition to the North Pole, and followed by Octave and the baron, entered, exclaiming:

"It is we—don't disarrange yourselves—you have a fire here, how nice! I am a perfect icicle!"

And drawing up an arm-chair, she installed herself in front of the fire, raising her dress and exposing to view two little feet in black satin slippers. Then throwing aside her cloak, and drawing a long breath, she said: "Ah! that is better."

Carriages arrived before the door in rapid succession, bringing Mlle. de Beaulieu's relatives, M. Derblay's witnesses, and a few intimate friends whom it had been impossible to overlook. Among the number of these present had been M. Moulinet, Athenaïs, and the duke. The famous gala berlin and full-dress liveries had done duty on the occasion, but unhappily the darkness had not permitted the dazzling equipage to produce its full effect. Moulinet would have given a hundred francs to have had it at least moonlight, but the night star had been incorruptible, and had not shown herself.

The former judge was in a complete state of disenchantment. Coming from Paris to attend a wedding in the great world, he had fallen in with the most *bourgeois* of marriages. He had expected to see the cream of the aristocracy represented, and he saw in the drawing-room at this moment—whom? The notary who had sold Varenne, and the witnesses for the pair. It was a perfect mockery!

However, there had been a moment of genuine emotion on his part, and the marriage had seemed to assume a really royal aspect when, on their way to the church, the carriages had passed by the compact crowd of M. Derblay's workmen assembled silently on the square to take off their hats to their patron's young bride. As they stood before the gate, dressed in their Sunday best, to await the arrival of the *cortége*, the crowd of from fifteen hundred to two thousand persons, men, women, and children, assumed enormous proportions in the midnight darkness. And when, as the carriages passed, all the hats were doffed, Moulinet was quite overcome. He wanted to smile and bow as he had often seen official dignitaries do on *fête* days, but he was seized with a sudden agitation, a choking sensation in his throat, and began to laugh without quite understanding why.

Recalled to himself by a glance from Athenaïs, he alighted from his carriage with great dignity, elevating his head superbly, and smoothing down the wrinkles of his pearl-gray pantaloons. The church he found contracted and dingy; he seated himself with a grimace upon one of the wooden chairs of the choir, glancing around him with an air of lordly superiority. There were not twenty candles burning on the altar, and the sacerdotal ornaments were the same that had been used a week before for the marriage of the carpenter's daughter. There was in Moulinet the fund of Voltairianism natural to a former subscriber to the *Siècle*. A disposition for raillery seizing him, he leaned over to engage in conversation with the duke, but a glance from the latter made him think it best to desist. He therefore turned his attention to the ceremony, which was being performed as simple as for a pauper. The organ alone, under the touch of a skillful hand, accompanied the words of the priest, and echoed through the cold bare vaults in tones of subdued melancholy.

The duke was grave and thoughtful, with a pallid face and drawn

brows. He had gone back in memory to the burial of his father in the somber church of Saint Germain-des-Prés. The same plaintive notes, the same darkness pierced by the lustrous flame of the candles, the same burning of wax and perfume of incense. At his side was his aunt, who wept when she looked at him, and Claire and Octave, like himself, in mourning, who tenderly pressed his hands. Now he was alone. He had by his voluntary act cut himself off from those who had cherished and comforted him. The Claire whom he had loved was the wife of another, and he was to be the husband of a stranger of whose projects of revenge he recognized that he had been made the tool. He had paid his debt to those who had received him when an orphan by returning them evil for good. But was not he too punished? And in abandoning Claire had he not renounced his happiness?

He contrasted Philippe's conduct with his own, and was forced to confess that the iron-master had been as generous and devoted as himself had been ungrateful and selfish. He had been able to marry the woman he loved, though dowerless. He was a worker. He thought with bitterness of his own uselessness. For a zero to have any significance, a figure must be prefixed to it. For him to possess any value, his great name must be annexed to that of a rich *bourgeois*. Alone, what was he? A cipher. He was an object of luxury to be paraded for sale like a horse.

These reflections, which he made for the first time, inspired him with a profound horror of Moulinet. He saw himself his slave, and furious at the sight, resolved to revolt, and to rule him. Athenaïs, too, he saw in her true light as a narrow bourgeoise, basely envious and malicious. He looked at her as she knelt at her *prie-Dieu* ungracefully stiff in her superb dress, too richly ornamented for a young girl, gaping around, and with an air of being very much bored. Then his eyes rested on Claire, who was kneeling in her white veil seemingly deeply engaged in prayer, and by the motion of her shoulders he divined that she was weeping.

And near her stood Philippe, with his tall person and grave severe features. Did she love this man? Was it this person that she had chosen before himself? A sudden light seemed to flash upon him, making plain the true significance of Mlle. de Beaulieu's acts. As he watched her kneeling there, so beautiful in her grief, a thought crossed his mind which brought a fugitive smile to his lips. The De Bligny which he had become for fifteen days past disappeared at once and forever, giving place to the cold skeptical, *blasé* whom Russian corruption had made. He resolved to avenge himself upon this M. Derblay who had humiliated him. Was this iron-beater to be tolerated as the husband of such a girl as Claire? She was weeping, she detests him, and she loves me still.

And his old assurance returned to him. Feeling himself sure of his ground, he lost the air of constraint which he had worn hitherto, and recovered the careless ease of the *grand seigneur*, confident in his superiority. When the baroness turned toward him at the close of the mass, she met his glance so full of irony, that she knit her brow with the instinctive hostility of the watch-dog who scents a dangerous intruder.

When they passed into the sacristy, and the bride, raising her veil,

looked around upon her friends and family, the duke sought in vain for a trace of the tears which he had seen her secretly shed. Calm and smiling, she spoke with perfect ease and freedom. The duke was vexed. He would have wished to see her dispirited; but though he recognized that he would have her pride to contend against, he did not despair of winning a victory.

When he resumed his seat in the superb berlin with Athenaïs and her father, he had to endure the flood of comments which Moulinet had been forced to restrain during the ceremony. It was gay, truly, this midnight marriage in a sepulchral church. He, the former Judge de Commerce, didn't understand such marriages for his part. In three weeks his daughter would be led to the altar, and then it should be seen what a marriage meant. It should be celebrated at the Madeleine. He had ordered everything of the costliest. All the choir illumined, flowers and decorations, choruses and solos—

"Soli," interrupted the duke, who began to be irritated by this parade of magnificence.

"Solos, soli," resumed Moulinet, who attached little importance to the accuracy of his terminations. "And lastly, the singing to be performed by the artists of the opera, the very best. It will cost fifteen thousand francs, but what of that? Moulinet will not marry his daughter every day, and it must be talked of for a long time—"

"However little it may be talked of, it will be too much," said the duke, in a tone as cutting as sharp steel.

"But, son-in-law—" interrupted Moulinet, nettled.

"But, sir," again interrupted the duke, "I am not, in the first place, your son-in-law, and you will oblige me by not addressing me in a manner that is thoroughly common and vulgar. Lastly, here we are at Monsieur Derblay's, and I beg, in the interests of us all, that you will have as little to say as possible."

And alighting slowly, the duke offered his hand politely to assist Mlle. Moulinet from the carriage, while the former judge, completely nonplused, was wondering whether the duke took him for an imbecile.

Mme. de Beaulieu was seated in the great drawing-room at Pont-Avesnes conversing in low tones with Bachelin. She had that morning requested the notary to ask Philippe's permission to acquaint Claire with the real state of her fortunes. It was but just, she argued, now that the marriage was concluded, that she should be informed of her husband's generosity. But Philippe refused positively to avail himself of such means to win the affections of his wife, or to obtain a gratification to his *amour propre* by extorting thanks which she would feel to be humiliating. It was not her gratitude he wanted, but her love.

"Let it be as he wishes," said the marchioness, "but I doubt if in his place I should have shown so much delicacy. It is to be hoped that my daughter will learn to appreciate her husband as we have done. She is very pale, Bachelin."

The notary turned. Claire, pale as death beneath her wreath of orange blossoms, might have passed for Juliet rising from her marble couch at the voice of Romeo. The duke had just approached and bent over her with a melancholy smile:

"We are about to separate, Claire," he said, "and I wish first to

speak with you a moment. You can restore peace to me in a word. Say that you forgive me."

"I have forgotten all. I love my husband. Adieu, duke."

De Bligny started.

"I hope you speak truly," he said, returning her bravado. And he added almost menacingly: "Au revoir, Claire."

"You are going, duke?" said the baron, stopping him.

"Yes," he replied, coldly, "I have nothing more to do here. It is the husband's turn."

"Eh!" said the baron, "you speak somewhat bitterly. Confess that you felt regrets on seeing Claire married."

"Regrets! Is it I who have them?" he said, indicating Claire with a glance, who was hardly able to stand.

"That, my dear sir, is a presumptuous and I must add a preposterous reply. But since you are such a conqueror, do me the favor to look at Monsieur Derblay. Does he look like a man to be robbed of his wife?"

"Poh!" said the duke, carelessly, "since Vulcan blacksmiths have never had any luck."

"Take my advice and beware of the hammer," said the baron, gravely.

De Bligny shrugged his shoulders, and went to rejoin M. Moulinet in a recess of the door.

"We will go whenever you are ready," he said.

"You are not detained here by me," muttered the former judge. "What a reception! A dry wedding, we bourgeois would call it. I, you shall see, will do things differently. I shall give two dinners and a ball that will make a sensation. And when our guests depart, I promise you it will not be with their stomachs in their heels!"

Moulinet might have continued to enumerate his projected splendors; the duke was not listening. He was watching Athenaïs make her adieus to the bride. She approached Claire, and taking her hands:

"We will be neighbors in summer," she said. "Varenne is only a league from here. But how I shall miss you in the winter, how tiresome I shall find Paris without you. Will Monsieur Derblay keep you always a prisoner at Pont-Avesnes? I know there is nothing to be desired here. You love and are beloved. Promise to think of me in your joys and sorrows should such ever befall you. You know they will be mine also."

"Be assured," replied Claire, "that I value your friendship as it deserves. But happiness, you know, needs no confidant."

In despair of conquering her intrepid enemy Athenaïs determined at least to spare her no vexation.

"Will you kiss me?" she said.

"Certainly," replied Claire, and she touched Athenaïs' forehead with her soft and burning lips.

But the young wife was at the end of her strength. She took the arm of the baroness and led her from the room, saying: "Let us go. I am stifling."

The marchioness, uneasy, followed her daughter. Claire was ready to faint but her strength of will once more conquered her

physical weakness, and as her mother leaned over her in anxiety, she said affectionately:

"It is only a little fatigue and excitement, I am better now."

A feverish flush overspread her cheeks, and her eyes shone brightly. The marchioness, who had been kept in ignorance of her daughter's mental tortures and anguish, began vaguely to suspect that Claire had deceived her. Accustomed to bend to the will of others, to take in good part her husband's infidelities, and to yield to her daughter's affectionate despotism, she had never borne the burden of any responsibility; like all persons of weak character, it was her habit to accommodate herself to circumstances, and she was unable to comprehend any attempt to modify one's destiny. She had allowed Claire to follow out her wishes, and now began for the first time to ask herself whether she had been prudent.

"You are happy, my child, are you not?" she said, putting an arm around her. "I am no longer to fill the place of a mother to you. Tell me whether I have done all that was in my power to make you happy."

Claire saw the look of anguish in her mother's eyes, embraced her tenderly, and with a last effort at deception:

"Yes, yes, dearest mother, you have made me happy. Give yourself no anxiety about me."

As the marchioness melted into tears: "Do not unnerve me now," she added in a choking voice. "They might think—"

She did not finish, but pressing her mother once more in her arms:

"Go," she said, "we must part. Till to-morrow!"

Mme. de Beaulieu, quite reassured by her daughter's calmness, recovered her serenity, and returned without the least uneasiness to the salon.

At the same time Suzanne, unwilling to trust entirely to Brigitte's dexterity, accompanied the latter to Mme. Derblay's suite of apartments, and busied herself there lightly as a bird. Claire watched her in silent displeasure and suspicion, the thought crossing her mind that in her husband's sister there would be a pair of watchful eyes, jealously taking note of her pallors and all the beatings of her heart.

She saw in Suzanne a natural spy, and prepared to detest her.

Suzanne removed Claire's veil and toyed with it lightly, straightening out the flowers and visibly agitated by some wish which she hesitated to make known. After a little while she drew nearer, and said while her cheeks flushed:

"They say in our province that a flower detached from the bridal wreath of one whom you love brings happiness. I love you dearly. May I take one of these flowers?"

Claire looked at her coldly, and suddenly tearing off the wreath that ornamented her dress, she flung them at her feet.

"If they bring happiness they are useless to me. Take them, take them all!"

Suzanne drew back in astonishment as the bouquet fell at her feet, and turning toward Claire, her eyes filled with tears:

"You do not care for the flowers," she said, gently. "Yet it was my brother who gave them to you."

Claire was touched by the plaintive tone of her voice, and felt a

movement of self-reproach. But the violence of her character gained the ascendency, and the hand she had held out to Suzanne fell again at her side, lifeless and cold.

"Leave her, my dear," said the baroness, "she has need of a little quiet. Don't be vexed, and take your bouquet. It will serve you as a model one of these days."

And having quite reassured Suzanne, she accompanied her smilingly to the door. Then, turning to Claire, who remained silent and motionless, lost in a gloomy abstraction:

"What are you thinking about?" she asked. "You have wounded the child and very gratuitously! Why can you not govern your nerves? Listen," she went on with an attempt at pleasantry, "if you were being led to execution to the funeral march in the fifth act of 'La Juive,' you could not have a more dejected air."

Claire cast a glance so full of reproach at her friend that the latter became grave:

"Seriously," she said, "what is the matter?"

Claire rose from her seat, took a step or two at random, then returning to the baroness, seized her hands in a paroxysm of anguish:

"You do not see, then, how I suffer? You do not understand that I am going mad? In another moment all you who love me will have gone and will leave me alone in this great strange house. What shall I do? where can I turn? Every link that could bind me to the past is broken. Every hope that could draw me to the future has vanished."

"You are grieving as if we all had totally abandoned you," said the baroness. "Is not all the old affection still left to you? And you will have new friends, sincere and devoted. Your husband is here and he adores you. Take courage."

The baroness paused. She had observed a shiver pass over Claire at the words, "your husband."

"Oh! if you could know all that is going on in my heart. This marriage, that I have persisted in, now that it is accomplished fills me with horror. I want to fly from this man whom you call my husband. Do not go—stay—stay with me, he will not come while you are here. Oh! this man who inspires the first fear of my life, how I hate him!"

"Mon Dieu! Claire, you frighten me," exclaimed the baroness, really dismayed. "Perhaps your mother has not yet gone; shall I call her?"

"No," said Claire, quickly. "I want to hide from her above all. You saw how I controlled myself in her presence. She must not suspect my terror and despair. Dear mother! out of the weakness of her love for me, she encouraged and aided this marriage. If she could know! Oh, no, it is enough that I should suffer who have willed it all. My weakness has been disgraceful, unpardonable. It shall not be repeated."

And turning upon the baroness, who had become uneasy at the hard ring in her voice, an impassible face: "Go, rejoin your husband," she added, "and have no anxieties for me. Kiss me, and when you pass the threshold of this room, forget all that I have said. Will you promise?"

"I promise," said the baroness. "Till to-morrow."

And stifling a sigh, she gave a last glance at her friend as she left the room, murmuring to herself: "Poor Claire!"

CHAPTER XI.

In the vast apartment Claire was left alone. Her eyes wandered vaguely about her. The room was grave and severe. The lamps shed a soft light over the old tapestry which covered the walls, the beautiful series of the loves of Renaud and Armide. Under a crimson and gold tent, the knight reclines at the feet of the enchantress with one arm upraised, holding in his hand a richly chased cup. A little further off two ransoming knights are seen crossing the forest, their magic armor protecting them from the monsters that dispute their passage. Last of all, a representation of a battle between the Christians and the troops of the Sultan, under the walls of Jerusalem. Armide, standing erect on his chariot, drawn by white unicorns, hurls his terrible darts at Renaud, covered with the blood of the infidel. Upon a panel was an ebony chest of the Renaissance inlaid with many colored marbles, and opposite stood a beautiful columned bedstead of sculptured pear wood with a lambrequin of Genoa velvet. A chest of drawers in the Louis XIII. style, of black wood ornamented with wrought copper filled the room of the commonplace bureau. A superb mirror framed in bronze, with delicate leaf work tracery, reflected the dying light of the fire burning in the vast chimney-place. Massive copper candelabra fastened to the walls, and a Flemish luster suspended from a sunk panel of the ceiling, completed the rich and simple decorations.

Claire remained absorbed in reverie, and indifferent to all about her. In her eagerness to accomplish her purpose of consummating the act that was to efface in the eyes of the world the indignity to which the duke had subjected her, she had shut her eyes to all besides. She now saw herself face to face with the realities of her position forced upon her by the sight of this chamber which was to be hers in common with this man, well-nigh a stranger to her.

All her feelings rose up in revolt at the thought. She felt a horror of Philippe and of herself. She had been mad to have dreamed of such a marriage, base to have lent herself to it. Her ideas rushed through her brain in a rapid, confused tumult. She walked to the window, and opened it. The freshness of the night air calmed her a little. The moon, which had emerged from the clouds, lighted the great trees of the park, and reflected itself in the sheet of water. All was calm and still. Claire asked herself whether it would not be better to disappear forever in this pure, deep stillness, rather than remain to battle with the difficulties of life which were so abhorrent to her. For an instant she thought of descending to the peaceful smiling waters, and committing herself to them like Hamlet's betrothed, in the stainless purity of her only love.

But her regard for public opinion, the same dread of "what will the world say," that had so fatally influenced her conduct, restrained her from this act of desperation. She smiled bitterly at the thought that Athenaïs would declare that she had taken her life for love of the duke. She thought with a sentiment of disgust of the sensation

this romantic ending would create among her acquaintances; and finally she could not bring herself to distress, and almost disgrace, her family by a suicide. With a lingering look of regret at the sleeping luminous water, she closed the window and seated herself at the fire.

It was done—she knew it well, she was no longer her own mistress. She must live, and live bound to a man who would come to her armed with his rights, who could say to her, "I will"—to her, who had been always free, always obeyed. She felt at once terror and anger. All her pride rose up in revolt againt this subjection, and she began revolving in her mind the means of prevailing upon her husband to restore to her her liberty. She drew a picture to herself of a marriage in which both should retain their freedom. Whether Philippe were faithful to her or not she little cared, provided he were but respectful and compliant.

Let him do as he pleased, so he left her her liberty. Would it be difficult to obtain, of this no doubt ambitious iron-master, some complaisance toward a woman who brought him a considerable fortune as well as important family relations? He loved her, however—that she had well understood. But she chose not to take account of this sentiment. With the despotism of a woman habituated to bend all to her caprice, she thrust aside this love, the thought of which vexed her, and resolved that if Philippe proved exacting she would rebel. She entertained no doubt that she would triumph, and in her overpowering egoism gave not a thought to the wounds she was about to inflict upon the man who loved her.

The sound of footsteps in the next room caused her to start suddenly. All the blood rushed to her face. She rose involuntarily, and rested her elbow with a shudder on the tall mantel, murmuring: "It is he!"

Philippe, after watching the departure of the last guests, turned mechanically toward his bachelor's chamber, reflecting as he did so that separated from him by only a few doors was the woman he loved, in her bridal toilet, more agitated even than himself. How often had he anticipated this moment with a thrill of rapture! He was surprised now to find himself grave and collected. To his old love for Claire was superadded a feeling of protecting tenderness. He felt himself called to heal this wounded heart, and the old feeling with which he had cherished his sister in her childhood, came back to him. He thanked the providence which had blessed him with the longed-for treasure, and resolved to prove himself worthy of it by insuring his wife's happiness.

He surprised himself dreaming thus in his chamber half an hour after the departure of the guests. He smiled a little at his foolishness, and rising quickly passed into his dressing-room. His person reflected in the large mirror of his bureau reminded him that it would be absurd to present himself to his wife in his wedding-coat and cravat, he changed it, therefore, for a dark-blue morning-suit and again, quite overcome by his emotions, directed his steps toward Claire's chamber with a palpitating heart.

He passed through the little salon and tapped with his finger on the door. There was no reply. Thinking that he had sufficiently announced his presence, he entered.

Claire was standing, grave and silent, in her white dress, with her elbow resting on the mantel. She did not turn toward him, only dropped her head a little, and Philippe saw the coil of golden hair gleaming on her white neck.

He advanced slowly and spoke with effort.

"May I enter?"

Claire made with her hand a gesture of assent.

Profiting by the permission he glided in and, seating himself in a chair, bent forward almost at her feet. As he looked at her, the hard, contracted, expression which her face wore, astonished him. He knew that expression, he had seen it before, when she had found herself in presence of the duke, and it made him uneasy. He felt instinctively that she was gathering up her forces for a contest; what her projects were he could not guess, but it was plain that she was preparing to withstand him. He determined to penetrate at last this obstinately sealed heart, to discover the key of the enigma; and he became as calm as an instant before he had been agitated.

Claire saw the change and was disquieted by it. It might prove easy to get the advantage of a husband who was agitated and hesitating, but in putting him on his guard she had restored to him his penetration to divine, and his energy to combat her.

"We are alone for the first time," Philippe said in a low voice, "and there is so much on my heart! Hitherto I did not dare to speak, I knew that I should so ill express what I felt. All my life has been passed in work; I beg you therefore to be indulgent, and to believe that what I feel is worth more than what I say. You have seen me approach you, stammer a few words and relapse into silence. I feared to be too bold or too timid, so I was content to look at you, to listen to you, and your voice was sweet to me as a song. I forgot everything as I followed you with my eyes walking on the terrace in a ray of sunlight. You have entered so deeply into my heart. You have been my one thought, my hope, my all. Imagine then my happiness in finding you here—near me—my own!"

And seizing Claire's hand Philippe pressed it passionately to his burning brow. She started back and withdrew it.

"Monsieur, I beg you," she murmured wearily.

He raised his head quickly, and looked at her in surprise.

"Have I offended you?" he asked.

"Spare me at this moment, I beg you," she said gently, "I am, as you see, so agitated—"

He was moved by the profound distress in her voice.

"You are pale and trembling," he said sadly. "Am I the cause?"

Claire turned away her head to hide the tears that sprung to her eyes, and answered in a quivering voice:

"Yes."

"Reassure yourself, I entreat you. Do you not feel that it is my one desire not to vex you? What would you have me do? Speak. Nothing will be hard for me, I love you so!'

The young wife started with joy. A gleam of hope seemed to shine out of the darkness in which she was struggling. In the passionate earnestness of her husband she saw her power over him, and pitilessly she resolved to abuse it. She looked at him for the first time, with a captivating smile.

"Then—if you love me—"

She did not finish, but she made a gesture which Philippe understood.

"You wish me to leave you? Is that the proof to which you would subject me? I am resigned to it, if it is your will."

Claire breathed freely. She felt herself absolute mistress of this man who had caused her such terror. The expression of her countenance changed instantly. She turned upon Philippe a radiant face.

"Yes, I would thank you," she said. "The excitement of to day has been too much for me, I need quiet. To-morrow, when I am more collected, I will explain—"

Philippe was silent for a moment. He seemed to discover a false ring in Claire's words. In this embarrassed plea for postponement there appeared to be a mystery which he resolved to unravel.

"What can you tell me to-morrow or later that I may not hear to-day?" he resumed. "Are not our lives henceforth one and inseparable? Our path is marked out for us. It is yours to be confiding and frank, mine to be devoted and patient. I am ready to do my part; are you so also?"

The words were spoken clearly and firmly, looking directly into his wife's face.

"Confidence is not to be won in a moment," she said. "I have been married only two hours. My life has always been made happy. I have had the right to think aloud, or to be silent. I have had no need of deception. My troubles, and I have had them as you know, were divined; it was understood that memory was not to be blotted out in an instant. I have been spoiled. No one has required me to smile when I was sad. If I must be forced to practice dissimulation with you, at least give me time to accustom myself to such constraint."

Claire had with great skill disposed of the necessity to reply to Philippe's question. She assumed the rôle of victim. He felt that he would seem cruel to insist.

"Say no more I beg you," he said, going in advance of the sacrifice required of him. "You can never have a friend more tender and devoted than I. When I married you, I assumed my share of your troubles, I undertook to make you forget them. Trust me, I am responsible for your happiness. Far be it from me to impose on you my love. What I ask is to be permitted by care and tenderness to aid you to conquer yourself. This is my whole ambition. And since you need rest and solitude, remain here free and secure as yesterday. I leave you, that is what you wish, is it not?"

Claire was at once irritated and uneasy. The iron-master showed himself so great and so noble that all her combinations to recover her liberty threatened to end in miserable failure. Could she remain separated from Philippe, anticipating her wishes as he did with such unexpected indulgence? How without cruel injustice could she continue to repulse forever a man so generous and so devoted? She saw her danger and resolved to break loose at once and absolutely from the ties which bound her to him.

Seeing that she remained silent he bent forward, and lightly touched with his lips the fair forehead of his young wife, "Adieu, till to-morrow!" he said. . . .

But on breathing the perfume of her golden hair, on feeling the contact of his lips with her throbbing brow, he lost his self-command and by an irresistible impulse caught her in his arms.

Claire, astonished at first, grew livid. Bending forward, and placing her hands against her husband's shoulders, she disengaged herself from the odious contact.

"Leave me!" she exclaimed, angrily.

Philippe drew back. He saw her trembling before him, her face distorted with anguish.

"What!" he said, in an agitated voice, "you do not give me even the right to touch your forehead with my lips? You repulse me with violence, almost with horror. You hate me then? And why? what have I done? Stop a moment! Your words of a moment ago come back to me—I fancy I see their meaning. After the treachery from which you have suffered, there is something more than bitterness still remaining in your heart—regret, perhaps—"

"Monsieur!" protested Claire in a hollow voice.

But Philippe had grown animated. A rising anger brought the blood to his cheeks, and he began pacing to and fro with agitation.

"Vague protestations between us are useless. The time has come for frank and clear explanations. Your conduct toward me furnishes ground for suspicion that must be cleared up. A woman does not so repulse her husband without a cause, you would not treat me thus unless—"

He stopped. The words suffocated him. His breath came hard, he grew very pale and his hands shook. Turning to his wife, so as not to lose a movement of her countenance.

"This man who so basely abandoned you—can it be that you love him still?"

Claire saw that the opportunity had arrived to effect the rupture she so earnestly desired. But she hesitated to seize upon it. Her husband's anger terrified her. She stood before him uncertain and hesitating, with contracted brow and beating heart, feeling that her destiny hung on a thread.

Her silence completed Philippe's irritation. Quite beside himself, he grasped her arm with violence, and looking at her with kindling eyes:

"Did you hear?" he said. "Answer! You must! I require it!"

His hand on her arm had the effect of a finger on the trigger of a gun upon the haughty young wife. Affronted and exasperated she looked steadily at her husband:

"Well, and if I do?" she said boldly.

The words were hardly uttered before she regretted them. The iron-master drew himself up, his tall figure grew still taller, his face wore a terrible expression, and raising his arm like one of his ponderous forge-hammers: "Wretched woman!" he exclaimed.

Claire did not move. She bowed her head and let her hands fall listlessly at her side as if prepared to receive her death blow. He saw it and heaved a sigh, moved off a step or two, and seized his right hand in his left as though he would crush it to punish the threatening gesture. Then recovering his calmness:

"Let us see," he said, "weigh well your words. What you have just said cannot be true. It is impossible! I am dreaming, or you

wish to subject me to a proof. That is it, is it not? Do not fear to confess it, I pardon you in advance for the injury you have done me. You will know one day that it is wrong to abuse a heart like mine. It is a cruel game that you are playing."

He forced a smile, but his lips refused to relax. Claire remained dull and insensible; obdurate with the inert tenacity of a block of stone.

"Speak to me!" resumed Philippe entreatingly. "You are silent? It is then true?"

She made no reply, surrendering herself to the destiny which she had prepared, vaguely conscious that she was committing a crime, but determined not to relent.

Philippe turned toward the window, and pressing his burning forehead against the glass, strove to recover his composure. He understood that the dreadful explanation which he had entered upon with his young wife had only just begun, and determined to discover how far she intended to carry her revolt, he turned toward her.

"It was, then, with a heart filled with another that you consented to marry me? After the indignity of his treatment, after the affront which he has put upon you, you love him still! And you dare to tell me so! You gave your word to me to be a true and faithful wife, and this is how you keep it! Without a blush you placed your hand in mine. To what degree of moral depravity have you fallen!"

"Monsieur, I have no defense of myself to offer," said Claire. "Is it generous of you to make me suffer so?"

"You suffer!" exclaimed Philippe. "And do I not suffer? I who love you with my whole soul, who was prepared for anything to please you, and who asked of you only a little indulgence and affection. To satisfy your wounded pride, to insure your pique from being suspected, you have sacrificed me, speculating on my confidence, laughing, perhaps, at my blindness. Do you not see that your conduct has been atrocious?"

"And have you not seen that for fifteen days past I have been beside myself?" exclaimed Claire, throwing off all self-restraint. "Do you not understand that I struggle within a narrow confine from which I cannot free myself? I have been led on by an irresistible fatality. I must appear a wretch in your eyes. You can never judge me as harshly as I judge myself. I merit your anger and your contempt. Take everything, only leave me my freedom. My fortune is yours, I abandon it to you. Let it be the ransom of my liberty."

"Your fortune! You offer it to me! To me?"

He was on the eve of speaking, of acquainting her with the ruin which he had kept concealed from her with such scrupulous delicacy. What a vengeance to take on the haughty Claire! But he instantly rejected the thought as unworthy of him. And calmed by the consciousness of his moral superiority over her, he could regard her without anger.

"Have you in truth," he said, coldly, "mistaken me for a man who sells himself? In marrying you, did you conceive that I made

a speculation? You mistake, you fancied you had still to do with a Duke de Bligny."

The blow struck home, and starting as though in insulting the duke he had insulted herself,

"Monsieur!" she said, flashing a lightning glance at Philippe. But she stopped suddenly.

"Well, why do you not go on?" he said, bitterly. "Defend him! It is the least you could do for him. You are perfectly in a position to appreciate him, your conduct so closely resembles his. Calculation and duplicity—that is your rule, is it not? I see it clearly now. You wished to marry a man who would be subservient to you, and you chose one who loved and trusted you. A union with me was a mésalliance, but my docility would make amends for my want of birth. If, by chance, I should be disposed to revolt, you had wherewith to shut my mouth. A bag of crowns! What could I say, married to a wife so noble and so rich, I, a vulgar, sordid man! This was your plan. And when did you acknowledge it to me? Honestly, an hour before the ceremony, when there was still time for me to decline the bargain? Not so. You let me understand it only when it is too late to draw back, when all is over, signed, irrevocable, when I am securely your dupe and you have no fear of my escaping you! And I have walked blindly into the snare, fool that I was. Never dreaming of this clever intrigue, I came to you awhile ago tremblingly, with a throbbing heart to make my declaration of love! Was I not more than insensate, more than ridiculous? Was I not shameless, ignoble, for it was your fortune that I wanted and I am paid! what right have I to complain?"

And breaking into a frenzied laugh, Philippe sank on the sofa and buried his face in his hands. Claire had listened to this terrible outburst without protest. She was more wounded by her husband's reproaches than touched by his grief. She was in the wrong, but the truth irritated without profiting her. She did not hear Philippe's cry of suffering, she was conscious only of the irony of his words.

"Monsieur," she said, haughtily, "let us cease. Spare me useless raillery."

Philippe removed his hands, and raised to his wife a face bathed in tears.

"I am not railing, madame, I am weeping—for my hopes deceived, for my happiness lost. But enough of weakness. You wished to buy your liberty. I give it to you freely. Rest assured I shall never trouble it. All ties between us are severed. But as a public separation would occasion scandal, I beg that you will spare me that. We will live near each other, but apart from each other. The day will come when you will learn the truth, and know that you have been more unjust even than cruel, and you will wish, perhaps, to undo what you have done. Let me assure you that it will be useless. You might implore my forgiveness on your knees, and I would have for you no word of pity. I might have been indulgent to your anger, I cannot forget your selfishness and your hardness. Adieu, madame, we will live as you have wished. Here is your suite of rooms, there is mine. From to-day you no longer exist for me."

Claire bowed her head without a word in token of assent. Philippe, with a heart full of anguish, gave a last look at his young wife,

hoping to discover some token of hesitation or relenting which would restore her to him as he was about to lose her forever. He saw her indifferent and icy. There was not a glance of her eye, not a movement of her lips.

He crossed the chamber, opened the door slowly, closed it with regret, lingering to hear if an exclamation, a sob, or a sigh, would not give him, wounded, humiliated, as he was, a pretext to return and offer to forgive before it was too late. There was not a sound.

"Miserable pride that will not bend, I will break it!" he murmured.

And retracing his steps as he had come an hour before with a heart bounding with hope, he returned to his own chamber.

CHAPTER XII.

THE lamps burned low. The fire had died out. Claire stood rivveted to the same spot in front of the tall chimney-place striving to collect her thoughts. She had emerged with triumph from the con test, but had she been deafeated, she could not have felt more thoroughly crushed. Her head seemed to weigh so heavily that she could hardly sustain it with her hand. There were strange buzzings in her ears, and everything whirled before her eyes, while great drops gathered on her brow. She suffered horribly and without strength to move or energy to call.

At length she sunk into a chair, but only to start up suddenly with violent pains in her limbs, and began walking to and fro in spite of the heaviness of her head. She felt a sharp pain above her left brow as if a nail were being driven into her temple, and her pulse throbbed with a raging fever. She walked up and down the room bent double, groaning with pain, muttering incoherent words between the chatterings of her teeth, and with the same tormenting, intolerable thoughts forever besieging her excited brain.

She suffered thus for two hours, unwilling to call for aid, and fancying that if she even opened her door her husband would think she wished to ask for pardon, and would return. Relying upon his word she had not turned the key or drawn the bolt. A sad victory, alas! and one which would have frightened Philippe to witness, for the fever had so altered her that she could have inspired now no sentiment but one of pity.

When day began to break she was still pacing her chamber, endeavoring to cheat by movement the increasing pains in her limbs. With pale face and lifeless eyes, feeling as if her brows were being beaten with a hammer, she dragged herself to the window and gazed out for a moment at the reddening dawn. She tried to open it, hoping that the fresh air would revive and calm her, but she had not strength to turn the bolt, and with a cry fell fainting on the floor.

About nine o'clock Brigitte approaching on tiptoe to ascertain whether her mistress was awake, detected the sound of a groan. Alarmed, she opened the door and saw Claire lying motionless in the spot where she had fallen, talking aloud but unintelligibly. In a trice she raised her in her arms. undressed and placed her in bed like an infant, and seeing her quieted and refreshed by contact with the cool sheets hurried in quest of Philippe.

She found him in his chamber and dressed, and taking in at a glance the unused bed and the look of distress on her master's face, she shook her head gravely:

"Ah! Monsieur Philippe, you have been weeping—and she—"

The iron-master grew livid. The idea flashed across him that Claire had committed some act of desperation.

"Well?" he asked, with a gesture of anguish.

She perceived his thought. "No," she said, "but so ill!"

Philippe heard no more. He rushed like a mad man to Claire's chamber. There, on the floor were strewn in disorder the white dress, the tumbled skirts, the little slippers, the perfumed white satin bodice; and on the pillared bedstead lay Claire with crimson face and eyes shining brightly through their half closed lids, while gravely, lance in hand, the warriors on the tapestry seemed to be keeping watch over her. Philippe might approach. She did not know him. He took her hand. It was burning hot. A profound torpor had succeeded to the agitations of the night. In alarm he dispatched a carriage for the best physician in Besançon, and a messenger to notify the family at Beaulieu. Then he took his seat at the head of Claire's bed, plunged in agonizing thoughts. Was she going to die and all be ended? She remained perfectly motionless with eyes open now, only, from time to time, raising her hand with a moan to the back of her neck. Evidently she suffered acutely, and every moment the delirium increased.

All the husband's bitterness vanished at the sad spectacle. Superstitious for the first time in his life, Philippe thought that if Claire recovered from this illness it would be a sign that they would end by being happy. And to save her was henceforth his one thought. He still loved her passionately, in spite of what she had made him suffer, even because of it, perhaps. Seated there at the foot of her bed he passed two of the most cruel hours of his life. The arrival of Mme. de Beaulieu and Octave to assume a share of the responsibility was an inexpressible relief to him. Fortunately the marchioness did not give way to floods of tears and lamentations, but after a few inquiries and suggestions, took a seat by her unconscious daughter's bedside, and sat there, grave and pale, while Octave in a fever of impatience hurried off to meet the physician.

Toward midday the latter arrived, and it needed little clairvoyance to divine the nature of the malady. He shook his head and muttered:

"Very serious!"

To the questioning glance of the mother, brother, and husband, he replied:

"Meningitis."

After listening long and attentively to her breathing he rose and said:

"There is trouble at the heart resulting from a serious derangement of the nervous system. Send for a dozen leeches and ice."

Suzanne, who was at the door, signed to Brigitte, and the latter sped away rapidly. The young girl had been waiting for two hours in the adjoining salon trembling and anxious, and not daring to enter. She glided up to the bed without uttering a word lest she should be banished, restraining her breathing and looking with ter-

ror at Claire's crimson face and pale lips. The air of the room felt stifling to her, and with the instinct which makes admirable nurses of all women she walked on tiptoe to the window and opened it. The physician smiled and said:

"That is well."

Philippe in his absorption had not remarked his sister's presence; he now turned and held out his arms to her. Suzanne leaned over his shoulder.

"Do not be afraid," she murmured, "we will save her together."

But if Claire was to be saved it was not to be by Suzanne. The iron-master, dreading her delirium, begged of his sister as a great sacrifice to leave them and return to her convent. Claire talked with a terrifying animation, and the name of Bligny was forever on her lips. She called to him angrily, overwhelmed him with reproaches, exposing to full view the cruel wound which her lover's abandonment had left in her heart. Philippe too appeared to her in her hallucinations, but always under a threatening aspect. After having killed the duke, he came armed to strike her, with blood on his hands, and she would implore him to send her to rejoin her lover.

And if Philippe must sit beside her and listen in silence to all these ravings, he had hope enough in the future to wish to spare his sister the knowledge of his misfortune. The time might come when it should all have passed away as a mournful dream, and he did not wish the shadow of a painful memory to rest between Suzanne and Claire.

And Susanne, grieving bitterly, but yielding as always to her brother's wishes, departed for Besançon under the escort of the faithful Brigitte, leaving Philippe alone in possession of his adored invalid. The marchioness, seeing the decision, sagacity, and unwearying watchfulness of her son-in-law, left the charge of Claire to him, only assisting him with her presence.

She would pass the day in her daughter's chamber, and when evening came Philippe took his place at her bedside, and, by the subdued light of a lamp placed a little to one side, watched. The delirium had not yet subsided, and the fever continued its ravages. Her face had grown thin, her cheeks sunken, and such was her state of exhaustion that only a feeble murmur now issued from behind the hangings of her bed.

One thought still kept distinct possession of Claire's brain, a consciousness that while she lay there ill, the duke's marriage was taking place. By a sort of double vision it all passed before her eyes at the very hour in which Athenaïs was ascending the steps of the Madeleine, covered with flowers, and the crowd was following the bridal pair into the church. In a lucid moment she raised herself and said in a clear voice:

"They are being married now, and I am going to die."

The marchioness drew closer to her, tried to speak to her and to divert her thoughts, but the delirium had regained possession. A fearful crisis followed, accompanied by crying and wringing of her arms while the drops trickled from her brow over her beautiful disordered hair. Philippe sent in alarm for the physician, who was not expected before evening. When he arrived he found the fever in-

creased. The arteries were like ducts surcharged with vapor, and ready to burst. One degree more would be the end.

It was a horrible day. Philippe awaited the issue of the crisis in mortal agony, feeling that his existence was being decided during those interminable hours. The thought that perpetually revolved through his jaded brains worn out by excitement and fatigue was: "If she lives we will end by being happy."

Evening came at last, but not the temporary quiet which it usually brought to Claire. She called in heartrending accents to the duke. Philippe rose and bent over her, believing her to be unconscious of his presence. But she opened her eyes and fixed them upon him with a look full of horror, made an effort to raise her arm, and said, in a hollow voice:

"You have killed him. What are you waiting for? Why do you not kill me too?"

Deeply wounded at seeing himself so misapprehended, and exhausted by the ceaseless strain upon him, Philippe grew weak as a child. He leaned his forehead on the carved pillar of the bedstead and wept bitterly, his tears dropping one by one on Claire's burning brow. These tears coming straight from his heart seemed to act as a magic filter. The young girl's features relaxed. She sighed and raised herself with difficulty on one arm to listen. Philippe sobbed without restraint, believing himself unobserved. A hand was stretched out and rested upon his, and a faint voice murmured:

"Who is it weeping? Is it you, mother?"

The iron-master raised his head and met Claire's eyes turned toward him. He drew nearer. She recognized him and her brow clouded over, as if she remembered. Then a tear glistened in her eye, and she extended her hand to the man whom she had made to suffer so much.

"Oh! it is you?" she said. "Always you—generous and devoted. Oh! pardon! Philippe, pardon!"

The iron-master fell on his knees and kissed passionately the eyes that for the first time had looked at him without anger. The young wife smiled sadly, then her features contracted painfully, bringing back the expression of hardness, the delirium returned, and she began stammering incoherent words.

For three weeks she hovered between life and death. But this crisis proved the last. The disease entered a new phase, and the violent agitation was followed by an obstinate torpor.

"The comatose period," observed the doctor. "We have been doing all we could to induce sleep, we must now do all we can to arouse Madame Derblay."

Philippe understood that unless there should be a relapse or some new complication, Claire was saved. But with the hope for her life arose the question how to adjust his own. While she had been in danger, his one thought had been to dispute her with death. His task now was to dispute her with life. With returning reason her repugnance for him would in all probability return. In the prostration of disease she had softened toward him, and in a moment of weakness had asked his pardon; but when restored to herself would she be still humble and submissive?

He had learned to understand the haughty temper of his wife and

dreaded a return of her intractable pride. He trembled at the idea that she might imagine he intended to profit by her convalescence to break the compact made on that frightful wedding night. If he seemed to be receding from his engagements, he might forfeit her esteem forever. Severity toward her would be indispensable, and he felt confident that the strength of his will would sustain him in not departing from it. He had sworn to break the pride of his wife. The vow should be kept.

It was January. The season was a severe one. The work of the factory, partially suspended during the height of Claire's illness, had resumed its activity, and the sound of the hammers on the anvil enlivened her. She found her long convalescence pleasant. Returning life brought with it a sense of enjoyment. The great, severe, somber chamber with its antique furniture and ancient tapestry panelings, where all was calm, harmonious, quiet, was pleasing to her. On the hanging before her bed was a nymph with floating hair bearing on her shoulder an urn from which a stream of water flowed downward to the plain till it grew into a river. It seemed to her as if the beautiful figure contained an allegory, and that from this inclining urn her life was being poured out.

Through the large windows she could see the trees of the park covered with snow and glittering in the sun. The birds beat their wings against her window as if to ask an asylum, and she threw crumbs to them. She took an interest in everything. Her strength was gradually returning and with it a keen delight in the sense of being born again, physically and mentally, as she lay idly on her bed listening for hours to the ticking of the clock without an idea in her brain, lost in a delicious void.

She and the marchioness passed days together. Philippe now came only once, morning and evening, to inquire for her, and ascertain if anything was wanted, and after remaining five minutes, walked gravely away. She listened to his step as it became lost in the distance, watched for his visits, began to find them too short, and to feel slightly irritated against him.

An opportunity arose to make a little display of temper, and she availed herself of it. She expressed a desire for some flowers, and the marchioness brought her a bouquet of white lilacs from the conservatory at Beaulieu. When Philippe arrived he was about removing it to the salon, remarking that she was not yet able to bear the scent of flowers.

"But I am very well, I assure you," said Claire; "there is no objection to my having the flowers."

"Like all convalescents," said Philippe, smiling, "you overestimate your strength. We must use our judgment for you."

"I must be entirely well, since you can run the risk of opposing me," replied Claire, with a coquettish pout. "When I was ill you did not venture."

Philippe became immediately grave. He glanced at Claire with a look that was sad and severe. She sighed, and said, in an altered voice:

"You are right. Take the flowers. Thank you."

That day she was pensive. As she gradually recovered strength to reflect, the past came back to her. She began to question herself,

and was astonished to find not a trace remaining of her love for the duke. It had dropped from her life like decayed fruit. Her anger against Athenaïs was also gone. She pitied her, and saw that she was destined to remain the victim of an incurable envy. She made no inquiries respecting the marriage. She supposed it accomplished. Every one carefully avoided uttering the name of De Bligny in her presence, but it was a needless precaution. She could have heard it without emotion. Her heart had been made over new.

Her convalescence was slow. On her first attempt to rise, she fainted and had to be returned to bed. Philippe again took his place by her side and began to care for her with the same impassible and silent devotion. She still suffered with her head, and complained of a shaking, when she moved it, like the beating of the tongue of a bell.

"I was a trifle crazed before my illness," she said, smiling; "what will I be now?"

She had been just five months married when one beautiful April day she was able to go down into the garden, assisted by her mother and Brigitte. As she walked, with little steps, in the sand of the parterre, it would have been difficult to recognize the girl whom her mother had called a "*garçon manqué.*" Her pinched features had grown gentler, there was a softer light in her eyes, and the absence of her former erect and lofty carriage made her appear smaller.

From this day Philippe's attitude toward her never varied. Gracious, affable, and attentive, in the presence of strangers, he became chilling and gravely courteous when they were alone together, adjusting his manner so skillfully that he passed everywhere for a model husband. The marchioness, who had not been spoiled by the effusions of M. de Beaulieu, and who was accustomed to the calm, correct gallantry of the husbands in her world, entertained no suspicions of the truth. Her daughter's domestic affairs she considered to be going on admirably well, and quite reassured as to her health, she announced one morning her intention to set off for Paris, where Octave had been established since January. Faithful in his theories of equality, the young marquis had thrown to the winds his armorial bearings, and prepared to make of himself a good practicing lawyer.

Claire was therefore left alone with her husband. They met at meal hours only. After dinner he escorted her back to the salon, took his seat for five minutes, then bade her good-evening, and withdrew to his cabinet. Curious to know what he did there, Claire threw a cloak around her one evening, went out-doors, and watched his shadow pass and repass on the curtain of the lighted window, the reflection of the light imparting to it a gigantic height. He walked back and forth, slowly and thoughtfully. She returned to the chateau, regained on tiptoe the room opposite to his cabinet, took her seat in the darkness, watched the line of light under the door, and listened to the muffled sound of his regular footfall on the heavy carpet. He walked thus till midnight. When the last sound had ceased, and all was silence, she heard him open his chamber door, and the ray of light vanished.

What was he thinking about during this prolonged walk? What

absorbing thought filled his brain during these long solitary hours? Claire would have given much to know.

Having a desire, she was not a woman long to repress it, and one evening, when he was taking leave of her as usual:

"What do you do, shut up there alone so late at night?" she asked.

"I am settling up some back accounts," replied the iron-master, quietly. "And by the way, I have some money to hand over to you."

"Money?" asked Claire, in astonishment. "To me?"

"The revenues of your property for six months." And placing the notes on the table he added, quietly: "Be so good as to verify the amount, and see if it is correct."

"Take it, monsieur," she exclaimed. "I cannot accept it."

"You must, it is indispensable," and he pushed the notes with a disdainful gesture toward her.

She rose prepared for a contest. Philippe's action and gesture had irritated her to her very depths. Her eyes flashed. She was again the old haughty, impetuous Claire.

"I will not," she said, fixing her eyes on her husband in defiance.

"You will not?" he repeated, in a tone of suppressed irony.

Their glances met, hat of Philippe so full, direct and resolute that the hand which she had raised dropped again at her side and she was silent.

For the first time she had set her will in opposition to her husband's, and had found it broken in the encounter; and it was with a mingled feeling of irritation and pleasure that she was driven to a recognition of his superiority. Attracted by the force of his character, she began to be interested in studying it. In the expansiveness of her return to life, she had resolved to be good and to accord a frank friendship to Philippe. She discovered with a feeling of pique that she was disposed to grant more than was asked of her. When she evinced a readiness to make advances as far as friendship, he confined himself within the limits of a chilling indifference.

He betrayed no ill humor. Had he done so, she would not have found herself without resource. His manner toward her was that of perfect unconcern, and humiliated by his disdainful negligence, Claire employed her ingenuity in combating it. Her nature was essentially militant. She needed always a difficulty to surmount.

When Bachelin dined at Pont-Avesnes, Philippe passed his evening in the drawing-room. The young wife invited the notary twice a week regularly and played whist like a dowager. With Bachelin, the iron-master talked and played, but when the guest had departed he became again severe and silent, and the young wife, despite all her efforts, made no progress in the conquest of her husband.

His command over himself exasperated her, and when alone in her chamber she gave vent to paroxysms of anger. She trembled at feeling that she was dominated. This man was her master. He led her as he would, and when she attempted revolt, with a look could reduce her to obedience. He hammered his wife's character, and it was in his power to make it assume what form he pleased. She shed tears of mortification at the discovery of her weakness, but with a lingering of the old pride, concealed her chagrin from

Philippe, and appeared always before him resigned without bitterness, and dignified without rigidity.

But if Claire was indifferent to what transpired elsewhere than at Pont-Avesnes, her friends at Paris did not suffer themselves to be forgotten. Since her retoration to health the baroness had written with intermittent fervor letters filled with incoherent but curious details, and through her Claire had news of the duke, the duchess, and M. Moulinet. Athenaïs had made a noisy entrance into society, and had become a favorite with the men, but the boldness and freedom of her manners had enlisted all the women against her. The duke gave himself little concern about his wife; three months after their marriage he was virtually separated from her, and was offering his homage to the beautiful Countess de Canelheilles, an Irish lady, with deep blue eyes, changeful and disquieting as the sea. As for the duchess, she flirted with a half dozen young elegants with frizzed frontlets and irreproachable ties, apart from whom she was never to be seen. She termed her little phalanx of gallants her "six-horse equipage," and drove it with a steady hand, running no risk of being spilled out.

Moulinet, since he had disposed of his daughter, had undertaken projects of importance. He employed a secretary, and shut himself up for several hours of the day in a beautiful apartment attached to his suite, which he had christened library, though it contained not a single book. There he had a treatise on political economy spread out on a large desk, over which his daughter affirmed that he napped conscientiously from two till five. The baroness asserted also that the former Judge de Commerce must be preparing for some candidacy. He had been seen in company with mediocre-looking persons who could be none other than journalists. He had made also several expeditions to the Juras. He was engaged in building a lay school in his commune, and secretly in restoring the church; with his lett hand caressing the Radicals and with his right flattering the Conservatives, The chocolate-maker was showing himself Machiavelian.

The fact was that Moulinet had late in life been overtaken with an inordinate ambition. He reasoned that having so well managed his own affairs he would excel in directing those of others. Was there a man in the Chamber, he asked himself, who could support his political position on a more considerable fortune? And the answer was, No. Having bought a husband, "the very best to be had," for his daughter, he need not hesitate to buy an electoral commission for himself.

He could not decide at once between the Senate and the Chamber. Senator! The title had an august sound. He had preserved a sort of fetishism for this body, formerly composed of the most eminent names in France. But, on the other hand, deputy, too, sounded well; and the Chamber was more active, more animated. He divined astutely that in the Chamber he would find a sufficient number of men of a mediocre order to enable him to become a man of consequence among them.

He had fully made up his mind to shrink from no sacrifice to insure the success of his campaign, and he went to Varenne for the

purpose of setting up his first stakes. His district was on the frontiers of Besançon and the Pont-Avesnes.

M. Derblay's influence must be great, and he determined to conciliate it. He would visit the iron-master, and he craftily resolved to be very gracious and friendly. Not a hint of his project should be suffered to escape; he would announce to Claire that he had returned to Varenne for the summer season; he would succeed in satisfying her that he had been simple rather than ill-intentioned with regard to her; that, in the affair of the duke, he had merely acted as Athenaïs' unconscious agent.

At the same time, he established a newspaper at Besançon, in the interests of his candidacy, the *Courier Jurassien*. The editor-in-chief was one of the mediocre-looking persons, who had been with the former Judge de Commerce. He had chosen the most presentable among them, and, on being offered an assortment of political convictions, from which to make a selection, Moulinet had fixed upon a nice little Republican opinion floating between the right and left centers, of a shade deep enough for the impassioned, and light enough for the timid. Something like the words of the "Marseillaise" to the air of "Queen Hortense."

For the rest, the complexion of his candidacy disquieted Moulinet very little. For his conclusive argument he counted on his bag of crowns, and justly.

His projects annoyed the duke excessively. It was the opinion of the latter that his father-in-law, having won his fortune, had nothing to do but enjoy it, and he favored him with his views with the lightly impertinent familiarity which was his habitual tone with the former judge of commerce.

"What on earth induces you to meddle with politics?" he asked. "Are your affairs too prosperous? A strange lunacy it is that leads quiet people to be putting their fingers in brawls! Do you know they might be stupid enough to elect you?"

"That, my dear duke, is what I expect."

"And we will see what it will cost you."

"What is that to you?"

"A great deal. I married an only daughter, and you are giving her a sister."

"A sister?"

"Certainly, politics! And a sister who will have a whole host of children: all your courtiers, agents, aids, patrons, defenders, not to mention the electors who will devour you at their pleasure, and Heaven knows where it will end!"

Moulinet made an imposing gesture, and striking his vest-pocket, a deplorable habit of his, of which he could not rid himself:

"My means, son-in-law, admit of the indulgence of all my caprices. I am only sixty. I might entertain danseuses."

"And I would not call it a crime! At least, such follies as that I can comprehend. A little foot, a pretty ankle, a round figure imprisoned in the gold circle of the Egyptiennes in the ballet of 'Faust,' and a pair of black eyes, or blue, searching for you in the orchestra—perfect! It is worth the trouble. But, to turn your declarations of love, to offer your bouquets, to pay over your income to

Marianne? Monsieur Moulinet, you distress me seriously. Let me advise you to take to the danseuses."

"I am grieved, my dear duke, but I have morals. I prefer politics—"

"Much good may they do you! Shall you speak when you are elected?"

"Very probably."

"It will be gay! I shall go to hear you, and take my friends. But try not to become a minister. You would end by compromising me!"

Disdaining the banter of his son-in-law, Moulinet proceeded in the execution of his projects. He went early in the spring to establish himself at Varenne, and began to work up his electoral matter.

The marchioness, about the same time, returned to Beaulieu, and Suzanne had been withdrawn from the convent, bringing with her life and animation, and relaxing to outward appearances, at least, the relations between the husband and wife.

Philippe had to act the part of a tender husband before Suzanne, and he acquitted himself so well that no suspicion of the truth entered the young girl's mind.

She believed her brother to be perfectly happy. As for Claire, she no longer recognized her. The proud, repellant Mlle. de Beaulieu had grown simple and smiling, and Suzanne found in her a gentle, thoughtful affection, which was that of both mother and friend.

The youth of Claire, suppressed by anxiety, disappointment, and chagrin, had begun to flow again like the sap of a tree. The two sisters never quitted each other.

Suzanne had recommenced her customary rounds among the workmen, and Claire accompanied her everywhere, like a beneficent fairy. The money which had been placed in her hands by Philippe was employed in aiding the unfortunate. Together, the pair were to be seen on the Pont-Avesnes road, dressed simply and sheltered by large umbrellas, accompanied by a russet dog of Philippe's.

In a few months Claire had become the idol of the workmen. She was well known to all the working population who had often seen her pass on her horse, indifferent and absorbed, thinking of the duke, and touching her hat, with a distrait air, with the handle of her riding-whip when they bowed to her.

They had thought her proud, and styled her, as they did her mother, "The Marchioness." And, having become Mme. Derblay, she still remained for them "the marchioness."

To all these men she was a being of superior race—so white she was, so slender, so elegant, even in her simple woolen dress, that, in the muddy streets of the Pont-Avesnes, or at the door of their huts, she appeared in their eyes like a young sovereign. They adored her. Octave returned to Beaulieu in July, and the sports began. There were delicious drives through the woods in a basket-phaeton, driven by Claire, Octave following on horseback. They proceeded slowly beneath the overhanging branches, and through the grasses, following in the ruts made by the wood-carts.

Sometimes it was necessary to alight, and Octave would push the phaeton while Suzanne led the horse by the bridle, Octave's mare

following on behind as gently as a lamb, looking at Claire out of her great, liquid eyes, as if to beg for the accustomed lump of sugar.

These were happy days, and Claire forgot her sadness; but when evening came, and she found herself in her great chamber, she had intervals of profound discouragement. She had destroyed her life, and without remedy. She knew Philippe well enough to be assured that he would never return to her.. He would remain faithful to the compact which had been made between them. He had restored her her liberty, and would leave it, as he had said, undisturbed.

With what joy would she have surrendered it! Impetuous and proud, she had had to deal with a stronger than herself. It was with a bitter pleasure that she recognized that she was mastered.

A man had come and placed his hand on her shoulder, and had bent it. And she loved him for the very reason that he had made her feel the weight of his will.

In the long hours which she passed alone, she bitterly reproached herself for not having sooner discerned the superiority of the man whom she was to marry. She recognized fully now the importance of the position which he held in the country.

Each day she discovered, with astonishment, one of the numerous sources of the iron-master's wealth. She learned, with surprise, that he was on the way to become one of the princes of industry, that dominant force of the century.

She felt overwhelmed with shame. It was to such a man that she had offered her fortune as a compensation for the wrong she meant to do him! What was her fortune, added to the ironmaster's vast wealth? A drop of water in a lake. She felt how odious and ridiculous had been her pride; and thought, with an intense chagrin, how Philippe must despise her.

But, following his example, she succeeded, by a strong effort of will, in hiding her feelings in her own breast.

But her tenderness for him would betray itself in her own despite. She could not prevent the joy with which she welcomed him from breaking out on her countenance. She had no eyes but for him; and all her ingenuity was exerted in devising ways of pleasing him. She loved Suzanne dearly for her demonstrativeness.

One day, as they were seated on the terrace, Suzanne amusing herself by passing a blade of grass along her sister-in-law's neck, Claire threw her arms around her. Philippe was sipping a cup of coffee, with an air of unconcern, following with his eye the flight of the martins.

Claire looked in Suzanne's face affectionately, sighed, and murmured, as she touched the light curls on her forehead with her lips:

"Dear child, how like your brother you are!"

Philippe had heard. He started. Nothing equally direct had ever come from Claire's heart to his. He sat motionless for an instant, then, without a word, he walked away.

Mme. Derblay brushed aside a tear, and Suzanne threw her arms around her with a fury of affection.

"You are weeping!" she said; "what is the matter? Oh! tell me. You know how I love you. Has Philippe wounded you? You know he could not mean it. A word would be enough. Shall I tell him?"

"No," said Claire, quickly. "I am a little tired. Philippe could not be better to me; and I am very happy," she added, looking fixedly at Suzanne, as if to impress the conviction on her mind. Then, rising: "We will take a little turn," she added, gayly.

And they went together to the park, racing like two lunatics, and laughing as though nothing had occurred.

It was one of the last of Claire's comparatively happy days.

The next day the Duke and Duchess of Bligny arrived at Varenne.

The news of their arrival vexed her, for she had hoped never to see them more. She remarked that Philippe observed her with more attention than usual.

After Suzanne had retired, he approached the subject of the relations which they were to establish with Varenne.

"After your brother, the Duke De Bligny is your nearest relative," he said, very quietly. "There has been no open rupture between you. You even made it a point to maintain good relations with him at the time of your marriage. I think it would not be well to alter your line of conduct now. However, it is a question which concerns you more than any one else. Let me know your wishes, and I will conform to them."

Claire was silent. This new intervention of the duke and Athenaïs in her life seemed to her fraught with danger; an instinct warned her that misfortune would enter it with them. She was on the eve of speaking—of opening her heart—of imploring pardon, perhaps. But she did not dare.

"You are right," she said. "They must be well received, and I thank you for imposing this restraint on yourself. Be assured that the presence of the duke will be as painful to me as to you."

Philippe answered by a motion of the head which signified nothing, and the conversation rested there.

CHAPTER XIII.

It had not been the choice of the duke to establish himself at Varenne. Parisian to the core, he could not endure the country; the plane-trees of the boulevards and the chestnut-trees of the Champs Elysées were verdure enough for him. The temper of his mind was far from contemplative, and reading he detested. The club where he passed his afternoons, and for the most part his evenings, constituted the sum and substance of life for him. He now found himself bored by his wife and father-in-law in very superior fashion, and solitude had come to be precious to him. He shut himself up in the smoking-room every day after dinner, where, extended on a large divan of Havana leather, he slept with clinched fists. At the end of a week of this existence, unable to endure it longer, he announced that pressing business called him to Trouville, when Athenaïs proposed to him a visit to Pont-Avesnes.

The proposition surprised, and at first rather displeased the duke. The thought of Claire had gradually faded from his mind, but he had preserved a recollection of the iron-master very distinctly. He had grown indifferent to the wife, but had not ceased to cherish a feeling of resentment against the husband. Why, it would have

puzzled him to say. Perhaps because he had been made the accomplice of Claire's public affront to him. Perhaps because he was the very opposite of himself. At all events, he was conscious of an instinctive hostility toward the man whom he still styled "the blacksmith." Nevertheless he was curious to see what turn this marriage, so singularly contracted, had taken, and, without much importunity, suffered himself to be prevailed on to accompany his father and wife to Pont-Avesnes. "My departure," he said to himself, "will be delayed but one day, and it is due to poor Claire that I should show her some civility at least."

He felt sorry for her, and had formed in his mind a singular conception of the existence which she must be leading. He thought of her as having grown contracted and sordid, as entirely engrossed in affairs of business, keeping her husband's accounts perhaps, and wearing black percale with sleeves down to the wrist.

He had seen Pont-Avesnes only at night, and was surprised to find himself entering a handsome court with an elegant French parterre, and also at the severe majesty of the château. The lackeys were in good style, there was nothing of a provincial air about them, he saw the salons in their splendor of luxury, and was forced to admit that Mme. Derblay's household appointments were of the most enviable.

Claire's entrance embarrassed him. She was no longer the Claire whom he had known. She was not more beautiful than the woman whom he remembered; she was different: simple, grave, yet with an air of command which made him feel constrained and awkward. M. Derblay was too good-looking not to arouse his displeasure, and for the first time he observed that he was decorated. The duke was silent and abstracted during the visit, and during the ride home continued taciturn. But at dinner his apathy suddenly gave place to an animated volubleness. The next morning he said nothing of the pressing business which called him from Varenne.

But he shut himself up more than ever in the smoking-room. Only he did not sleep. Extended on his divan, he smoked the Levantine cigars, which conduce to reverie, following with his eyes the wreath of blue smoke which seemed, as it curled upward, to pursue a fugitive form. The fair face of Claire as he had seen it in the subdued light came before him. He closed his eyes and he saw it still.

Determined to escape from the haunting vision by movement, he had his horse saddled and rode in the park, giving his steed free reins. It was four o'clock, and the woods were beginning to fill with uncertain sounds, the racing of vagabond rabbits stirring the leaves of the thickets, the occasional start of a magpie from the top of an oak beating the air with its short wings, and uttering shrill cries. The day had been warm, but the air was now cool and fresh, a balmy fragrance arose out of the earth, and golden rays from the setting sun were piercing the forest trees.

The duke put spurs to his horse and set off at a gallop. He had emerged from the park without perceiving it, the charming phantom that still haunted him flying ever before him and leading him on. His horse bore him to the edge of the woods, he saw before him a low wall above which were dense overhanging branches, and an ex-

tensive green lawn, at the further end of which arose a white building. The duke started. He had recognized Pont-Avesnes.

Chance then had led him toward her from whose sight he was flying. Was Destiny about to bring together those she had parted? His words to the baron the night of the marriage came back to him: "Since Vulcan blacksmiths have had no luck." He forgot the terrible hammer with which the baron had threatened him; and after forming a resolution to himself, he returned with a less heavy heart to Varenne.

It had not been without an afterthought that the iron-master had resolved to show an easy cordiality to the duke. Nothing would have been easier for him than to restrict his wife's intercourse with her relatives within the limits of the most formal neighborly association. But he had formed a plan the execution of which involved the opening of his house to them.

During the long hours passed by Claire's bedside, he had gone over the events that had preceded his marriage, had taken into account the animosity with which Athenaïs had pursued her rival, and in assigning to the duchess her share of the blame, he felt more disposed to make excuses for Claire. But he could not depart from the severity of his conduct toward her. The conflict upon which he had entered must end in victory for himself, and in reparation for the affront to which he had been subjected. He saw that Athenaïs had a rôle to perform in the dangerous game which he meditated. The battle was to be fought out between her and Claire, between the duke and himself. It would be a bitter warfare on a battle-field full of treacherous pitfalls. It might end in the death of a man, but what had he to lose? His existence was compromised, his happiness lost. He could only gain by trying the venture. He was prudent, however, as well as resolute; and reflecting that the position of Claire would be too isolated, since he must not appear in her defense, he determined, in order to provide for her a faithful ally, to invite the baroness to come with her husband and pass a few weeks at the chateau. The forces would thus be equalized, and there would be nothing to do but to await the result of the engagement.

It had been apparent from the first that the duchess' intention was to revolutionize this quiet corner of the province. She invited thither from Paris the most brilliant pair of her two-horse equipage. "La Brède and Du Tremblays," she said with a laugh, "will suffice for the country. They will be harnessed *en poste*, and with plenty of bells the effect will be fine."

And La Brède and Du Tremblays arrived with a cotillon, a lawn tennis, and a polo, among their effects; and as though the devil of Paris had sprung from their valises, hardly had they set foot at Varenne than existence there became a frenzy of excitement. Besançon furnished a band of ten musicians, for every Saturday there was dancing at the chateau. From all the chateaux around, berlins, britzskas, wagonettes, a motley array, some in the style of the Restoration, made the road to Varenne resound with the rumbling of wheels. Gayly dressed squires, with muscles hard as the rocks of their native mountains, set to propelling balls at lawn tennis, send-

ing the polo ball at a gallop over the lawn, and dancing whole evenings through with indefatigable vigor.

The heart of Moulinet rejoiced to witness the aristocracy of his district roused to passionate ardor by his daughter. "So many guests, so many voters," said the candidate to himself. He stimulated the duchess' zeal, allowed her unlimited credit, and while the daughters and wives were dancing, took in hand the fathers and husbands. He had one source of vexation, however. Neither the prefect nor the general in command attended the soirées at Varenne. Perhaps it was too aristocratic a gathering for the civil representative, and the military chief perchance deemed it prudent to refrain from exhibiting his stars in the duchess' salons.

"What matters it whether or not the prefect comes, provided the citizens vote for you?" said Athenaïs. "Have an attack made on him by the *Courrier*, make them tell some stupid story about him. Shall I get it written by La Brède? It would be droll. As for the general, he is a cipher; his soldiers don't vote."

Athenaïs had a more serious cause of chagrin of her own. Mme. Derblay had excused herself from attending the Saturday soirées, pleading that she was not yet able to bear late hours. The duchess, whose main object in these *fêtes*, had been to secure the presence of Claire, devoured her wrath with difficulty, and had spells of ill humor which dampened the gayety of all about her. Not to be in a position to overwhelm her rival with the spectacle of her splendor, and to plunge daggers into her heart by exhibiting herself on the arm of the man who was to have been her husband; not to see how she would start when she heard her addressed as madame the duchess, was to forfeit all the pleasure she had promised herself. Her hatred, which might have been appeased by the spectacle of Claire's humiliation, was aggravated by her resistance, and by the haughty repose of her countenance.

Claire came once to Varenne to dinner, upon which occasion her conduct and bearing were adjusted with perfect tact. The petulant, intrusive duchess appeared by the side of her high-born and elegant rival in the light of an ill-bred little woman, acting and speaking as her impulse prompted, with the unrestrained freedom of the millionaire parvenu. All the advantage was on the side of Claire, and Athenaïs knew it. She would have been capable, had she not been afraid of the consequences, of disfiguring and destroying with vitriol the beautiful tranquil eyes in which she read such a world of disdain.

What irritated her more than aught else was the good understanding that seemed to exist between M. and Mme. Derblay. The husband was thoughtful and attentive, and there was no mistaking the smile on Claire's face when Philippe was by, and she felt herself under his protection. She loved. And surely she was loved. It could not be that the iron-master did not adore her, gifted as she was in person and mind, and had he not married her for love? Had he not overlooked all the humiliating strangeness of the situation, accepting her ruined in fortune and abandoned by the duke with a simple happiness, as though he had won some rare treasure? It was Claire's destiny then to be loved, whilst hers was to leave men indifferent. True she was courted, but what was this mere drawing-

room gallantry to the deep unalterable love which it was Claire's privilege to inspire?

In the fury of her jealousy, she concentrated her efforts upon M. Derblay and absorbed him a great portion of the evening. In truth she admired him. With his bronzed complexion and black hair cut close on his forehead, he resembled an Arab. Athenaïs thought that if any man were capable of capturing her fancy it would be Philippe. And delirious at the idea of exciting the jealousy of Claire, she gave free vent to her natural coquetry with an animation which astonished herself. She remarked with fiendish exultation that Claire's face clouded over, and that she observed her anxiously. She told herself that she had discovered the weak point in her rival's armor by which she might hope to deal her a mortal blow. Philippe's attitude toward her was that of a well-bred man who is the object of flattering attentions from his hostess. He accepted her advances gracefully, gave her his arm to promenade the salons, was just assiduous enough to exhibit himself in a very agreeable light, and just cold enough to make it impossible for any one to distinguish a difference between his manner to her and to any other lady present.

But master of himself though he was, it would not have escaped an attentive observer that he was the prey to a violent agitation. While the duchess strutted with him like a young peacock, exhibiting to him the salons and conservatories, he had seen Gaston and Claire speaking apart with each other. The blood rushed hotly to his face, and his arm contracted, pressing with sudden violence the hand of the duchess, who glanced up at him in surprise. They were in a little conservatory called by Moulinet "the tropics," in whose damp warmth were growing poisonous plants of India and Africa.

"What is the matter?" asked the duchess, smiling and returning a slight pressure to the arm of her escort.

"The heat and perfume here are somewhat oppressive," replied the iron-master, recovering himself. "Shall we go in?"

And they returned slowly to the salon, his eyes fastened upon the duke and Claire who continued to talk apart.

The duke upon rising from dinner had conducted some of the guests to the smoking-room, and placed at their disposal a varied collection of cigars and cigarettes. At the end of a half hour pleading his duties as host he had left them there amid a cloud of smoke. His design was to contrive an opportunity to approach Claire. He knew, however, her impulsive temper, and with all his assurance, he hesitated, feeling that the first words spoken between them would have an important bearing on their future relations. He was uncertain whether it would not be wiser to abstain until time had made the ground firmer beneath his feet. But De Bligny had reached a point of cynical egotism that would not permit him to postpone the gratification of a caprice. He made gradual approaches in her direction, making short pauses by the ladies, narrowing the circles between them like a bird of prey. It was in this way that he had succeeded in reaching the back of her chair. Bending over near enough to breathe her delicate perfume:

"Are you well this morning?" he asked, in a caressing tone. "I

have come almost tremblingly to inquire for you, uncertain as I am whether you can see me without displeasure."

Claire turned quickly and looked the duke full in the face.

"And why should I see you with displeasure?" she asked. "Should I have come to your house had I entertained such feelings toward you as you attribute to me?"

The duke shook his head sadly.

"This is the first opportunity we have had to speak freely together since your marriage, and I see that we are not yet to speak frankly. It has been one of the troubles of my life that I should have seemed blameworthy toward you while it was out of my power to make the explanations which might have absolved me."

"You have no need of absolution, let me assure you," replied Claire, tranquilly. "Have I reproached you? Such a belief as that would evince a strange fatuity on your part."

"You relieve my conscience of a heavy burden," resumed the duke. "My marriage was one of the fatal necessities of Parisian life. I found myself in a position which made it necessary to choose between my happiness and my honor. I had two debts to discharge, and in satisfying one I must leave the other unpaid. I sacrificed my love to save my name. That, Claire, is what I felt that I must say to you."

"In other words, Monsieur Moulinet extricated you from an embarrassing position, and you in return married his daughter—and several millions of dowry. Come, duke, 'penitence is sweet,' as the song says. And, besides, if I understand you aright, you have the sense of duty fulfilled to sustain you in this trial. You must be happy, therefore, and I am delighted—"

The duke winced under the sting of her irony.

"And you?" he said, suddenly. "Are you happy?"

"You are the last man in the world who could have the right to ask such a question," she retorted, proudly.

At this moment the duchess returned with Philippe. The duke indicated by a gesture her husband with Athenaïs on his arm. Claire turned pale.

"You deserve to be better loved," he said, looking at her with a profoundly satirical expression.

Claire shuddered at the thought that the duke had perhaps penetrated her secret. She saw the dangers to which she would be exposed if the evil thought should enter his mind to occupy himself with her. How could she continue her work of conquering her husband? How prevent him from being incensed at the duke's pursuit of her? Or with this dangerous assailant to ward off, how could she be free to combat the duchess who was striving to entangle Philippe in her coquetries? She resolved upon flight, and making a sign to her husband which brought him immediately to her side, she requested him to ask for her carriage, and cutting short Athenaïs' blandishments, and with a distant bow to the duke, the young wife led away Philippe with as much precipitation as if the chateau had been on fire.

When she found herself rolling over the road through the soft transparent night, she felt herself saved and ventured a question:

"What did you think of the duchess?"

"Charming," replied Philippe, absently.

Claire shrunk back in a corner of the carriage with a movement of ill humor which in the darkness was unobserved by Philippe. She had heard only the word "charming," and did not remark the profound indifference with which it was spoken.

"We will not go any more to Varenne," she said.

As she spoke, there passed before the eyes of Philippe a vision of the duke's elegant figure bending over Claire, murmuring soft words with a perfidious smile, and with a choking at his throat and menace flashing from his eyes, he clinched his robust fists tightly.

They did not return to Varenne. M. Moulinet's invitation was returned to the duke and duchess, but they persistently declined the aggressive courtesies of their neighbors. Athenaïs, exasperated, began to find "La Brède" and "du Tremblays" tiresome, and took no pleasure in waltzing with the gentleman farmers. There were fireworks, tilting on the Avesnes, crowning of *rosières* to fanfare accompaniments. They led the noisy gay fatiguing life which Athenaïs adored, but it was all in vain since Mme. Derblay was not there to witness her triumphs. The marchioness, freed upon the heights of Beaulieu like a solitary turtle-dove, had not set foot at Varenne, and the absence of M. and Mme. Derblay began to give rise to comment. The Baroness de Préfont with her nimble tongue having arrived at Claire's, Athenaïs saw that an embroilment between Pont-Avesnes and Varenne was a thing to be apprehended. She must break the ice which was thickening between the two households till it threatened to become fast ice. Some almost public entertainment to which all the best society of the country should be invited could alone serve as a pretext.

An inspiration which came to La Brède, without malice on his part, furnished the occasion. He proposed a *rallye*—paper hunt—in the woods of Varenne and Pont-Avesnes. The civil and military authorities were to be invited, and every one would follow the chase. A gigantic lunch would be prepared at the rond-point of the Etangs. In a word, it was to be a hunting fête which should furnish a theme even for the journals of Paris.

Athenaïs well-nigh embraced La Brède for this inspiration of his genius. And starting her father out to issue invitations, she went herself to Pont-Avesnes and returned, radiant, with a favorable reply.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE rond-point of the Etangs was situated between the woods of Pont-Avesnes and those of Varenne. A succession of ponds extending the distance of four or five hundred metres covered with rushes and large-leaved plants with shining stems, had given it its name. The oaks spread over them their branches as if thirsting for the cool moisture, and the fallen leaves of successive autumns formed a thick slime along its banks in which the boars delighted to wallow. Fences painted white inclosed a cross-road two hundred metres wide, covered with a thick soft turf and enormous beech trees with grayish trunks, and dense foliage surrounded the rond-point with their cool shades. The eight roads twenty metres in width, and

skirted by red-tinted heather, met at the cross-road and became lost in the dense forest. It was a spot full of silence and mystery. The waters sparkling with light and rippling in the breeze mirrored the quiet azure of the sky. M. Moulinet, a passionate lover of fair nature, seduced by the beauty of the landscape, had dishonored the spot by erecting on it a Chinese kiosk.

In the middle of this vast cross-road was placed a table where valets in grand livery dispensed refreshments to the guests of the duchess before they started upon their long circuit. For an hour La Brède coupled to the faithful Du Tremblays had been occupied in scattering bits of paper through the copses to indicate the trail and preparing the false scents with conscientious care.

Through all the roads leading to the rond point came riders, breaks, Amazons, and calashes. The bright dresses of the women shaded by umbrellas of many hues, and the blue jackets of the hussars, formed gay groups beneath the gloomy shade of the trees. The horses, held by guards in green uniform and round caps, kept their gourmand mouths close to the fresh grass, and there was a clashing of stirrups, a neighing of steeds, and a popping of corks from champagne bottles.

In a tight-fitting riding-habit, and waving in her gloved hand a whip ornamented with an enormous cat's-eye Athenaïs did the honors to her guests with surprising gayety, ease, and grace. The ladies were seated on the cushions of the duke's great mail-coach which had been arranged for them along the sloping turf. Moulinet in a blue coat and pearl-gray gloves—at ten o'clock in the morning—had taken possession of the baron for whom he had been seized with a tyrannical affection. The duke wore the English full-dress hunting-suit, a red coat, white kid trousers, and black velvet cape with a green knot in the back, field green being the color of his armorial bearings. Philippe wore black as usual with gray velvet trousers, and spatterdashes.

Claire and the baroness, as if they had adopted a uniform, wore each a plain blue cloth riding-habit and round hat with a black plume, and were adorable in this simple costume. The sun gilded the trees and threw a bright light over the brilliant tableau.

"Monsieur Derblay!" exclaimed Athenaïs, suddenly breaking off a conversation with the much-desired prefect, "do you not think it is time to start? It has been an hour at least since the gentlemen set off with their papers, and if they have made good time we shall have a hard gallop to come up with them."

"I confess I am but little acquainted with this sort of exercise," said Philippe. "Ask Pontac, who as master of the hounds must be well informed."

A tall youth in a hunting-coat ornamented with silver lace wearing a tricorne, a knife at his side, and a Dampierre horn on his shoulder, advanced, and bowing to the duchess said, with English formality,

"If Madame the Duchess will confide the direction of the hunt to me, I promise before two o'clock to have Messieurs La Brède and Du Tremblays at their wits' end. Shall we give the summons to start?"

"Yes, vicomte."

Pontac turned with his trumpet to the middle of the cross-road, and inflating his cheeks as if his design was to level the trees of the forest, made the woods echo with the notes of the fanfare.

"My compliment," said the duchess, "your talent is extraordinary."

"It is hereditary," he said, with gravity; "we have sounded the trumpet for three centuries."

And shaking his head with an air of superiority, the vicomte turned in the direction of his horse.

In an instant the whole assemblage was in motion, the riders with their feet in the stirrups, the spectators following in carriages of every description.

"Monsieur Derblay, you are so familiar with the country," said the duchess with a smile to Philippe," will you act as my guide?—we will take the lead—"

"But, duchess, have you not Pontac, who knows better than I how to lead," said Philippe.

"But I want you," replied the duchess gayly, "unless you refuse, and I hardly think you capable of that."

The iron-master bowed and made no reply. Claire, a few paces off, had heard Athenaïs' audacious proposal and trembled with anger. Tears of vexation sprung to her eyes, and involuntariiy she grasped the arm of the baroness.

"You are of us, are you not?" said the duchess, turning to Claire.

Claire bowed and answered calmly:

"No, I think I overrated my strength in proposing to follow the hunt on horseback. I will go with the carriage—"

And she glanced with a mournful appeal toward Philippe as if to entreat him not to leave her.

"Are you vexed that I should run off with your husband?" asked the duchess. "A little jealous, perhaps," she added with a laugh.

"No!" said Claire, anxious to conceal her grief and helplessness.

"Then to horse!" said Athenaïs, impatient to consummate her victory.

With a heavy heart Claire saw her husband set off. Obeying an irresistible impulse to call him back, she exclaimed:

"Philippe!"

The iron-master turned quickly.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked. "Are you indisposed? Do you want anything?"

If she had spoken the word her husband would have remained. But pride that was stronger still than love arrested it on her lips. She shook her head, and said, with drawn lips and a haughty gesture,

"I want nothing. Go!"

Phillipe rejoined the duchess. The latter raised her skirt, revealing an ankle that looked slender and elegant in a gray buckskin boot and pointed out to M. Derblay that the strap of her spur was loose. The iron-master bent over and fastened the leather thong ornamented with steel chains to her instep, and attached the buckle at the heel.

Provoking and bold the duchess leaned over and tapped his shoulder with the pommel of her whip as if to establish her empire.

"Ah! and what is the meaning of all this?" muttered the baroness. But as she turned to her friend she saw her so pale and trembling that she dared not press the question.

"Should you like to have me remain with you?" murmured a low voice in Claire's ear, as she sat motionless and crushed, watching the two riders disappear in the distance and feeling that they were carrying her happiness on behind them. She turned and saw the duke at her side. Suppressing an exclamation of anger, she said:

"Leave me! I wish to be alone."

And taking the arm of the baroness she led her toward the Mares, while the duke turned his horse's head in the direction indicated by the horn.

Octave and Suzanne were sauntering slowly by the water-side, indifferent to the hunt, their horses fastened to the same tree caressing each other's neck, while the baron, seated apart, was breaking with a little hammer some specimens of minerals which he had picked up on the road-side.

Claire and the baroness were nearing the kiosk in silence. A profound stillness had succeeded to the movement and noise. A light breeze stirred the reeds through which sparkling dragon flies were wringing their uncertain flight. The baroness raised her eyes to her friend.

Claire had recovered her self-possession. A slight trembling of the lips alone indicated that her nerves were still agitated. Fearing to be divined even by the baroness she dropped her eyes, and turned away her head, assuming an air of indifference as she scraped her foot along the sand.

"What does all this mean?" the baroness broke forth, unable to contain herself longer. "I arrive at your house expecting to find Biblical peace and quiet there, and everything is at cross purposes. Your husband gallops away with Athenaïs, and the duke comes humbly to offer you his company."

"It is as in the quadrilles," said Claire laughing nervously, "ladies change."

The baroness became grave and took her cousin's hand in hers.

"Why do you try to deceive me?" she asked, "do you think me stupid enough not to guess the truth? Claire you are not happy."

"I! and why should I not be? Have I not luxury, gayety, a family who are devoted to me, a husband who gives me my liberty. That, you know, was my dream. Could I help being happy?"

"Well, my poor dear, what you say was your dream is now your despair. Your husband allows you your liberty, but he resumes his own. Your pride would protest, but your distress betrays you. You are not happy and you cannot be, for you are jealous!"

"I!" exclaimed Claire indignantly. And she burst into a laugh which ended in a sob. Tears sprung to her eyes, and hiding her crimsoned face on her friend's shoulder she wept bitterly.

After allowing her cousin time to disburden her grief and recover her composure, the baroness drew from her the secret of her rupture with Philippe, and all the frightful contrast between their outer and

inner lives. Without, affection, cheerfulness and a show of gayety; within, coldness, silence, and solitude. They had a rôle to perform in public, and they had performed it well. Hoping that she might bring about a reconciliation between this pair whom deplorable folly had separated, she began by an attempt to probe Claire's feelings to the bottom.

"When your husband was watching over you with such devotion, did it never occur to you to try and renew the ties that had been broken?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Claire, reddening, "I do not know what the change was that came over me, but I felt that I was no longer the same. Was it gratitude for his kindness, or was it a recognition of his true character? I cannot tell, but when he was not by I began to look for him; when he was near me I did not look at him, yet I saw him. He was so severe, so grave, that I dared not speak. If he had only encouraged me!"

"And he did not?'

"No, he is as proud as I, and more determined There is nothing to hope. We are separated forever!"

"And he takes it gayly! Our pretty little Duchess Moulinet—"

"Do not blame Philippe," interrupted Claire. "It is she who impudently throws herself at his head. She pursues me still! After my lover, my husband! And what can I do? How can I defend myself? Have I the right even? He is not mine."

"Dame! frankly, he is a little more yours than hers."

"But let her beware!" said Claire violently. "I have suffered enough through her, and if she drives me beyond the limits of patience I do not know what I will do, but something that will be the destruction of one or the other of us."

"There! my dear, calm yourself I have taken a hand in your game and will answer for our making an end of this delicious Athenaïs. She is a monopolizer you see, it runs in the family. Her father swept the stakes on his sugars. Her specialty is husbands, she wants them all. Mon Dieu! what fun it would be if she should take into her head to seduce the baron!"

And she indicated De Préfont who, still planted in the same spot, was beguiling his long waiting by making a collection of small stones, and stuffing his pockets with them.

"The situation is grave, it is needless to disguise it," continued the baroness. "If there could be an explanation it might end in a reconciliation, but in speaking there is the risk of a rebuff, and there is the end of it. I am convinced that your husband adores you, only he will not show it. Men of his sort love but once, and that forever. Monsieur Derblay has a head for battering down walls. You will not disarm a character like his but by surrendering to it."

"Ah! I should not hesitate, there is nothing I would not do to win him. But if he should see in it only another caprice?"

"You must wait for a favorable opportunity. If one does not occur, we will make it. But, for heaven's sake, get rid of that look of woful despair. You will be preparing too much delight for our sweet friend. Remember, to the world you are happy, and assume the appearance while you wait for the reality."

Claire sighed. She, the invincible, who had been wont to find

nothing an obstacle, now doubted her power and mistrusted her resolution.

"How serious we have been for the last half hour!" said the baroness. "All this conjugal psychology has made my head quite heavy. Let us take a little gallop. And I should be pleased to ascertain what our little Duchess Moulinet is doing with your husband. Will you come?"

"No," replied Claire, dejectedly, "I am tired and will remain here, with my brother and Suzanne, who seem as little in the mood for a hunt as I am."

Octave and Suzanne were approaching them slowly and in silence. When they reached the spot where their horses were tied, Octave, as he unfastened the bridles, turned to Suzanne with:

"May I tell my sister?"

Suzanne nodded assent.

"Certainly, you know how she loves us and how well pleased she will be."

"Then go with the baron and baroness while I remain with Claire."

And he presented her his two hands crossed. Suzanne placed her little foot on them and sprung lightly into her saddle. Then with a little pressure of her fingers, which told him what she dared not say, and a touch of her whip, she was off at a bound into the middle of the rond-point.

"Come, baron, to horse!" said Mme. de Préfont to her husband.

"I am at your service, chère amie," he replied, tearing himself away from the contemplation of his minerals. "It is curious—it would not surprise me if these rocks contained alum. I must call Monsieur Derblay's attention to it. We might compete with the alum pits of Italy. You remember? near Civita Vecchia. I carried you to see them on our wedding-tour. It would be a good thing, so much sulphate of alumina is needed for the manufacture of paper—"

"Yes, baron, yes," said his wife, and with a sudden access of tenderness, "you are a perfect angel, and what is more, a savant angel. There! kiss my hand."

"With pleasure," said the baron, tranquilly. The baroness waved her hand to Claire and Octave, and turning to Suzanne.

"All ready? Let us be off then."

And they galloped away at full speed.

Octave and Claire gazed after them in silence, the brother a little oppressed by the momentous confidence he had to impart, while the sister's thoughts were still busied with what the baroness had been saying, and weighing with an agony of doubt the chances of success in their difficult enterprise. Her brother's voice roused her from her abstraction.

"Claire," he said, "I have something to say to you—something serious."

As his sister turned to him with a look of questioning surprise, "Suzanne and I love each other," he added in a lower tone.

Claire's sad face lighted up like a stormy sky pierced by a bright sunbeam. She drew her brother toward her with both hands and made him sit down by her side, eager to know everything, seeing

already the opportunity which was to facilitate her approach to Philippe. She sat listening in silence while Octave poured into her ears the simple but already long romance of two hearts whose love had blossomed simply and naturally like lovely flowers beneath a bright sky.

"Your influence with Philippe is so great," said the marquis, "prevail on him to give me Suzanne. He has long known my ideas, that I do not regard the advantages of birth, and that it is my aim to make a position for myself. In short, be eloquent, for my happiness is in your hands."

Claire became suddenly grave. This influence which her brother attributed to her, she did not possess. Never since that fatal night had she exchanged a single serious word with Philippe. They met only at meals, and in presence of servants, had but little to say and on commonplace topics. And she was abruptly, without preparation or encouragement, to enter upon a serious question. But her natural confidence returned to her; she determined to try and felt a presentiment of victory.

Uneasy at Claire's silence, and like all lovers, quick to apprehend a difficulty,

"You do not decline to plead my cause?" he asked.

"No, surely not," replied the young wife with a valiant smile, "I shall plead it as though it were my very own."

"Thank you! oh, thank you!" said Octave, kissing his sister affectionately.

"That is my emolument," she said, with a gayety to which she had been quite a stranger for a year past. "You have confidence in me, evidently you pay in advance. Go and rejoin her, now that you have confessed your crime. I do not mind being alone as you know, and then I have to reflect upon what you have told me."

Octave was already on the way to his horse, and sprung into the saddle. Sending a parting kiss to Claire, he galloped off with the impetuosity of a man who knows the woman he loves is at the end of the road.

CHAPTER XV.

Left alone, Claire became oblivious to everything around her. A far off murmur accompanied by the fanfare of *Béenaller* and a sound of carriage wheels reached her from the forest, but she was indifferent to all that was not Philippe. She busied herself with reconstituting her life as it should have been, going over the past and counting the days of happiness that had been lost to her. At her present distance from that fatal epoch of her life she could hardly comprehend the sentiments that had actuated her, her delirium of pride had grown to be a thing inexplicable. Her eagerness to be married before the duke at any cost appeared to her now so paltry that she blushed at the thought of it. Was it such a vulgar motive as this that had led her to compromise her existence? Outraged, however, though Philippe had been, he could not continue inexorable. Yet there rose before her a vision of his severe and haughty profile; she still heard the sound of his voice when he said: "You will one day learn the truth, and will know that you have

been more unjust even than cruel; you might then fall on your knees, and I would have for you no word of pity."

But had not these terrible words been spoken in anger? Would he hold to them without relenting? Certainly he had once loved her, and on that night would have given his life for a kind look or a word of hope. In the eight months that had elapsed, had this love been entirely destroyed by the cruel wound which her hand had made?

"When one has deeply loved," she said aloud, as if addressing the question which agitated her mind to the woods, to the winds, to space, to the whole still mysterious nature by which she was surrounded, "when one has deeply loved, does one forget?"

"When one had deeply loved," said a voice which seemed to reach her from above, "one does not forget."

Claire rose quickly, and looking up, saw the duke, who had entered the kiosk a moment before, leaning his arm on the balustrade and looking at her smilingly.

"Confess that I arrived just in time to answer your question," he said gayly; "was it of me you were thinking?"

Claire looked at him out of half closed eyes.

"Ma foi, no!" she replied.

"So much the worse!"

"And you? why are you here?"

The duke descended six steps and approached her.

"Because of you," he said, bowing.

"With what purpose?"

"For the purpose of talking frankly with you. You gave me a sad welcome awhile ago when I offered you my company; I fancied I might perhaps find you more sociable, and here I am. Are you in a mood to talk to me?"

"Ma foi, my dear duke, I think we have nothing to say to each other."

"Are you certain? I have discovered, with regret, that you have learned to dissemble. You have trouble and you conceal it."

"And I have discovered that you are very perceptibly declining in intellect. You revert incessantly to the same idea with a little whining tone which is quite piteous. Reassure your too sensitive heart. I have no trouble, and I am not disposed to seek it in order to gratify you."

"Be it so," said the duke, good-humoredly. "I shall be glad to believe that I was deceived. The idea which I had formed appeared to me just, but since you have so well expressed yourself to that effect I must believe that I have lost my clearness of vision. This morning I thought you nervous and agitated. You had no interest in the hunt, but passed your whole time watching your husband."

"Well?" said Claire, repressing a start.

"Well," continued the duke, "the strange part of it is that Monsieur Derblay has no appearance of being concerned about you at all. He is at the command of the duchess, and acts as her cavalier, while you, instead of regarding this gallant service with satisfaction, flash lightning glances at them both."

"From which you conclude?"

"That the good understanding which you would pretend exists

between you is not real; that he does not value the treasure which chance or rather my misfortune bestowed on him; and then a thousand circumstances linked themselves together in my mind. I recalled your wedding-day, interpreted your sadness, analyzed your anger, and having summoned up the pros and cons, arrived at the conclusion that, despite your profession, you are less happy than you should be."

The attack was direct and audacious. Instead of retreating, Claire advanced to meet the enemy.

"And you, generous and compassionate soul, have deemed this the fitting moment to offer me consolation."

The duke was practiced in this sort of warfare, and he saw that the battle would be lost if he accepted the gauntlet Claire had thrown down. He must seem to be led on by a deep and serious sentiment. Quitting his bantering tone:

"You are unjust to me, Claire," he said, sadly, "believe me that I have done all in my power to forget you. When I returned here I thought I loved you no longer, that I might see you without danger. They told me you were happy and I rejoiced. Fool that I was! After such trials and disappointments I believed my heart dead. To my sorrow I have felt it revive, and the old memories return to me in an instant. I saw you, alas! anxious and sad despite all the efforts you made to dissemble your anxiety and sadness! You might have deceived another, but for many years your face has hid nothing from me. Had I seen you happy, I would have been content to worship you at a distance, and not a word from me should have troubled your peace. But you suffered, and I was no longer master of myself. A power stronger than my will drew me toward you, and I knew that for me there was but one woman in all the world."

Claire had listened in silent astonishment to these passionate words. Not a fiber of her heart stirred. Could this be the man whom she had loved to the verge of madness? She saw in him only one of these adroit actors who unsettle the minds and agitate the nerves of ill-balanced women. Not for an instant did she think him sincere; she saw in his pursuit of her only a passing caprice.

"Shall I tell you that you do not lack impertinence?" she said. "Having been called to choose between a woman whom you professed to love and a fortune that tempted you, you did not hesitate —you closed your heart and opened your cash box. Now that you have the money, you would not object, perhaps, to have the woman also, and you make advances to me! Ah! my dear duke, you are too ambitious. You cannot have everything."

The duke shook his head sadly. "You are severe! I knew you had not yet forgiven me."

Claire started, and replied with eyes sparkling with indignation,

"Not forgiven you! If I felt for you any sentiment whatever, it must be gratitude; for if I am the wife of Monsieur Derblay, who is as useful as you are incapable, as devoted as you are selfish, as generous as you are base, who has all the virtues which you do not possess, and none of the defects which you do, is it not to you that I owe it?"

The duke bit his lips. Every word had been like a blow struck full in his face.

"Monsieur Derblay is no doubt perfect; but there is one little idiosyncrasy which renders his perfection worthless—to you, at least. He does not love you! He has been married to you but a few months. If he cared for you as you deserve he would be at your side, and where is he? With the duchess."

"Your wife!" exclaimed Claire with violence. Then recovering herself with an effort. "Why should it disturb me if it does not you?"

"Me? Oh! I am not jealous," said the duke in a careless tone; "and then I know the duchess, she is an admirable doll baby with her lace and jewels; but under it there is neither head nor heart. Where could passion find a lodgment? But your husband—"

He drew near and spoke more slowly, as if fearing that his words in passing through the air would lose some portion of their acrid venom.

"You saw him at her side a moment ago—the ingrate who cannot understand his own good fortune, who recklessly risks the loss of it. Leave him to the duchess. They are worthy of each other. And suffer me to remain by you, who appreciate you, who understand you, who love you!"

Claire retreated a step. Then with oppression at her heart and vainly striving to appear unmoved:

"What you have said I can afford to laugh at."

"Yes, like Figaro, that you may not weep," replied De Bligny, "for it is profoundly sad, in fact. You are bound to a man who must always remain a stranger to you. Every thing in you revolts and protests against it. He is plebeian, you patrician; he has, I am sure, principles of equality, and you are an aristocrat to the ends of your fingers. He is without polish, and it shocks you, you are proud, and it offends him. Your race and his are natural enemies. His ancestors gayly cut off the heads of yours. Every thing in you inclines you to hate him, and nothing disposes you to love him."

Claire raised her head superbly. "Nevertheless, I love him, you know it well."

"You fancy you love him," he answered, in a gentle tone, as if trying to prevail on a child to listen to reason, "because you are jealous. But there are jealousies of various sorts—some spring from love, some from pride. I would venture to affirm that you suffer from the latter. Your husband neglects you, and little though you care for him, it irritates you. It is quite natural. All women are so; the crisis you are passing through, ma foi! I have it all at my fingers' ends."

Claire listened to the duke in silent indignation and disgust. He mistook for interest what was in truth stupefaction; and eager to follow up the work which he conceived himself to have begun:

"There are four phases in this crisis, like the four changes of the moon. At this moment you are in the first, that of resistance. Your husband is escaping you, and you are eagerly trying to reconquer him, that is your fixed idea. Soon you discover that your efforts are fruitless, and you enter the second phase, that of disenchantment. Every thing is crumbling; your illusions are fled, your

peace destroyed, and profoundly dejected you turn toward heaven, the refuge of the despairing. But as your husband pursues his course, your faith changes to bitterness. He is too gay, and you are too sad. After all you are but twenty-two, and have a right to love; one cannot be always solitary and alone. A secret irritation possesses you, and you enter the third phase, that of resentment. A veil has been torn from your eyes, and you see your husband as he is—awkward, vulgar, doltish. You are astonished that you regretted him for an instant. The end of the crisis is near. With a blush you put your pretty foot in the phase of consolation. Look up! the world is brilliant, rose-colored, gay. To forget is easy: a step more, and it is done. You hesitate? Let me offer you my hand to do the honors of this phase for which I am waiting with a little hope and much love."

The duke tried to take her hand. She repulsed him with violence, and turned upon him frowningly.

"Your calculations are ingenious," she said, "and argue a long study of wives. I only regret that you have so conscientiously studied the silly and depraved, overlooking those who are honest. I am proud to inform you that there are unhappy wives who refuse to avenge themselves, who find consolation enough in their own self-respect, and in meriting the esteem of others. What you call your love is an infamous persecution. What manner of man are you to incur my hatred after meriting my contempt?"

As she stood before him, trembling and indignant, a tress of golden hair had become detached and floated in a bright wave over her shoulder. Her bosom heaved under her dark-blue habit, and she brandished the riding-whip which she held in her hand as if it had been a weapon. De Bligny turned pale. He approached her, so close that she felt his hot breath on her face.

"Take care!" she said, drawing back. "A step nearer and I will treat you as the last of cowards and lash your face."

She drew back and raised her whip prepared to strike. "Am I, then, so publicly abandoned that I can be outraged by you with impunity? Had I a man near me to undertake my defense you would not venture to attack me, but alone as I am, anything is permissible! You shall see that I can defend myself."

The duke recovered his self-command and bowed.

"You will change. The future is mine. I will be patient."

His cold audacity exasperated Claire. She looked into the duke's face wildly, and in broken phrases, such was the violence of her emotion, said:

"Know that were I the most wretched of women, and were I capable of becoming the most infamous, such is the aversion and disgust which you inspire that I would choose the first comer, a stranger, no matter whom, sooner than you."

The duke received this outburst of fury coolly, and with the same assured smile which had the faculty of driving Claire beside herself, said:

"We shall see."

Claire did not give herself the trouble to reply. She moved away in the direction of the cross-road from which a moving curtain of aspens and alders separated her, to the spot where Moulinet's valets

were preparing a repast for the hunters. In the bottom of her heart she was frightened at the duke's aggressiveness. She had taken note of his flaming eyes, his trembling hands, his pallid face. The contest from which she had just escaped filled her with horror, she had lost all confidence in this noble lord whom she had so long worshiped as a divinity, and with deep sadness of heart sought for refuge and protection with the lackeys.

"Here they come!" exclaimed the chief steward.

Carriages were rolling through the forest and over the green turf in a noisy avalanche with horsemen at their side. They were still five hundred metres off, but there was an animated sound of voices which Claire felt to be in strange contrast with her own gloom. She felt angry that all nature was rejoicing while her own heart was so sad.

A carriage entering the rond-point diverted her from her gloomy reflections. The marchioness was buried in it as in her great arm-chair, with a lace shawl over her shoulders. Claire hurried to seek her protection and felt the air purer in her mother's presence. Mme. de Beaulieu had only shaken off her customary inertia at the last moment, and had her grand calash brought out that she might see her daughter ride.

"What!" she said, "you here, and all alone. Where is your husband? And Sophie?"

"The baroness left me a short while ago, and I insisted upon Philippe's joining the hunt. It is not necessary that a husband should be fastened to his wife's side in public."

"You are happy enough to allow yourself the luxury of concealing your happiness," said Mme. de Beaulieu. "Ah! Philippe is the pearl of sons-in-law."

The arrival of the horsemen at full speed interrupted the marchioness, and allowed Claire an opportunity to conceal the embarrassment occasioned by her mother's eulogiums. Le Brède and Du Tremblays, one very red and the other very white, their horses covered with foam, were soon surrounded and overwhelmed with congratulations on the manner in which they had sustained the chase.

Claire at a glance saw Philippe returning with Suzanne and the baroness. Sophie hurried forward and stopped near her long enough to whisper in her ear words which brought roses to the young wife's pale cheeks.

"He had left Athenaïs when we arrived. He turned her straight over to that imbecile of a Pontac, whose only talent is making a din with a hunting-horn. What an ornament to society!"

And she began to laugh, squinting at Athenaïs, who was approaching, quite deafened by her cavalier's horn, after the unintentionally impertinent manner of near-sighted people.

Seeing Claire, Athenaïs started her horse into a gallop, and with an ironical gesture to the duke, who stood at a short distance from Mme. de Beaulieu's carriage.

"So here you are, duke, and Madame Derblay also! It was amiable of you to remain with your cousin," with a diabolical grin in the direction of Philippe.

The iron-master advanced resolutely, almost threateningly. The

duke bowed. "I have not been so fortunate as to keep my cousin company. When I arrived here my aunt had preceded me."

"Then, my dear, your horse must be worthless, and I advise you to exchange it," resumed the duchess.

Angry at being foiled in her designs she struck her mare violently on the ear with her whip, making the animal start and plunge. The duke came forward quietly, seized the mare's bridle, and assisted Athenaïs to dismount.

"Nothing is in more wretched taste than to make your horse rear in that manner, my dear. Not to mention that you are but a tolerable rider, and might be unhorsed, which would be a pity—such ways have a strong flavor of the shop."

And leaving the duchess livid with rage he went to rejoin his friends, and drink toasts to the success of the day.

Claire, cold and trembling, took her seat in the carriage by her mother, and begged to be taken back to Pont-Avesnes.

The reply made by the duke to Athenaïs which had so seasonably prevented an intervention on the part of Philippe seemed to involve her in a sort of complicity with him. She would gladly have told all, preferring Philippe's censure or anger to this odious connivance with the man who had insulted her. But she dared not speak; she saw herself compelled to sustain this falsehood, driven to practice deception always and everywhere, and to preserve a smiling face with despair at her heart.

She glanced timidly at Philippe as he rode by the side of Bachelin's cabriolet. His face was composed and his voice, as he talked with the old notary, betrayed no emotion. She began to think she must have been deceived when she fancied she saw his eyes flash with anger as he advanced toward the duke. She hoped he was jealous. At the risk of her life, she would gladly have seen his hand raised threateningly toward her, as on that terrible night. She promised herself to speak to him the next day on behalf of her brother, and then she would penetrate her husband's mysteriously hidden thoughts. This resolution taken, she made an effort to be gay, to drive the clouds from her brow, and like the actor who appears on the stage to perform his rôle, assumed a mask of smiles.

Far off in the woods a faint murmur from the joyous company could still be heard, Pontac's horn waking echoes through the forest as it sounded the death of the stag, incarnate in the persons of La Brède and Du Tremblays.

CHAPTER XVI.

PHILIPPE was at work in his great severe cabinet, glancing rapidly over the papers which covered his table, affixing his signature with a dash of his pen to the document examined and passing rapidly to another. It was ten o'clock. The sun's burning rays fell direct upon the façade of the chateau; a single indiscreet ray shining on the iron-master's brow, interrupted his task. He rose, and walking to the window, looked around on the garden.

Beneath the shelter of a tent by the water's side, Suzanne in a white dress sat dreamily fishing, with her line agitated by the contortions of a fish that had seized the bait, making shining circles in

the water. She sat there motionless, her face beaming, absorbed in reverie.

Philippe smiled. He opened the window softly.

"Suzanne," he said, "do you know that a fish has bitten?"

The girl started and turned toward her brother with a pretty pout.

"Oh! Philippe, you frightened me."

"Draw in your line," said the iron-master. "A perch has been writhing there for ten minutes. We should not give needless pain to dumb creatures."

Suzanne drew in her line, making a silvery flash, and with her gloved hand unhooked and let the fish drop in a net pocket which lay on the grass.

"I have twelve," she said proudly, showing her brother the well-filled net.

"That will make a frying," he laughed. "It is of their own free will that they are caught in the snare."

He looked at his little sister an instant as she gravely pierced a red worm with her hook. She was so fair and rosy in the clear blue sky, under the penumbra of the tent, that he felt a sudden movement of tenderness toward her. He sighed, and dropping the blind to shut out the sun, was about resuming his seat when a gentle tap at his door made him pause.

"Come in," he said indifferently.

The door opened, and Claire, blushing and agitated, but resolute, stood on the threshold.

"Shall I disturb you?" she asked, as she drew nearer, while Philippe, much surprised at the unexpected inquiry, courteously advanced a chair.

"Not at all," he replied simply, and leaning against the mantel he waited.

Claire seated herself and glanced around her. This apartment, sacred to Philippe, was one which she never entered. Its cold gravity, a reflection of the character of its occupant, pleased her. Her heart beat fast and there was a tight pressure about her temples.

Philippe first broke the silence.

"You have something to say to me?"

Claire turned her eyes on her husband, and with a tinge of melancholy in her voice:

"Living apart as we do," she said, "I must have a request to make to risk disturbing you."

Philippe made a gesture of polite disavowal, and, as if to encourage her, said:

"I am listening."

The young wife bowed her head as if striving to collect her thoughts.

"What I have to say is very important," she said trembling, and with a choking dryness at her throat, "and concerns you as well as me."

"What is it?"

Claire raised her eyes to her husband with a look so full of entreaty that he could have fallen at her feet. He stood, however, quietly waiting.

"First, you feel an interest in Octave, do you not?"

"I think your brother has had no cause to doubt it hitherto?" he replied.

Claire's brow contracted a little at this equivocal reply.

"And if an occasion should arise to prove it?

"It is likely that I should avail myself of it."

"Well," she went on, "the occasion has arisen. Do you wish me to tell you what it is? It is a serious one—it concerns not my brother only—"

"Is all this circumlocution necessary?" interrupted the iron-master. "Does your request seem to you a very difficult one to obtain?"

Claire fixed her eyes on her husband's face as if anxious that not a movement of his features should escape her.

"Judge for yourself. Octave loves your sister and has desired me to ask you for her."

Philippe's countenance darkened, and a half-suppressed exclamation escaped him. He walked to the window, and raising the blind stood before it in silence. Suzanne, unconscious of what was passing, sat dreaming still with her line touching the surface of the sparkling water.

"You do not answer," said Claire, following him to the window, where he stood grave and thoughtful.

Philippe turned, and speaking slowly, as if the words pained him:

"I am sorry for your brother's sake, but this marriage is impossible."

"You refuse?" said Claire in an agony.

"I refuse," repeated the iron-master coldly.

"Why?"

"Because there is already one person in my family made unhappy by yours. I think that enough."

"But have a care," said Claire quickly, "lest you make Suzanne's unhappiness more sure by refusing her to my brother."

"Why?" said the iron-master, with sudden animation.

"Because she loves him."

"She loves him. That is a calamity in truth. But it will make no change in my decision. If, the day before I married you, some one had hindered me even at the risk of breaking my heart, he would have done me great service. The cruel experience which I have passed through shall at least not have been in vain. If my sister must weep she shall be free to weep, and she shall not have before her eyes a future hopelessly sacrificed."

The blow was so terrible that Claire could no longer contain herself.

"It is revenge that you are seeking," she said with violence.

"Revenge!" said the iron-master disdainfully. "Do you think I would accept one? It is a precaution that I take."

Claire sank into a chair. There was so much of resolution and disdain in her husband's words that she abandoned the contest, and thought only of attempting to move him by entreaty.

"Do not make me responsible for their misfortune, I implore you.

I am overwhelmed already. What can I do to soften you? I have wronged you, I admit—"

Philippe laughed bitterly. "You have wronged me—you deign to acknowledge it? It is a great concession that you make!"

Claire did not heed her husband's irony. She determined to persevere in spite of rebuffs.

"Yes, I have wronged you, but you have made me bitterly expiate it."

"I?" interrupted Philippe. "And how? Have I uttered a word of reproach—a word that could wound you? Have I been wanting in thoughtfulness and attention?"

"No, but how far rather would I have had your anger than you disdainful indifference. Everybody is vaunting my happiness; I am courted and flattered. I return here and where is it? I find only solitude, abandonment, and sadness."

"Has it depended on me," he said, "that it should be different? You chose your life. Is it not what you made it?"

"Yes, it is true," said Claire in broken accents. "But I might have counted at least on repose, and I have not found that." She rose agitated and trembling. "This woman pursues me with her hate even here, and you suffer it. You lend yourself to her maneuvers. You will not even, for the sake of pity, spare me her insulting bravadoes. My patience is at an end. I will not suffer it."

"You will not suffer it?"

"No!"

"You forget that it is I alone who have the right to say, 'I will.'"

All the blood rushed to Claire's face, and in a passion of anger and jealousy:

"Beware!" she said, "do not drive me to extremity. I might endure your indifference, but an insulting public abandonment I will not submit to it."

"How like your old self!" he said. "You are still the same—anxious as always for the opinion of others. Public opinion is still your great and chief concern. It was to appear well in the eyes of the world that you sacrificed yourself and me. And now, infuriated at the thought of provoking criticism, you forget yourself so far as to threaten me."

"No, I do not threaten," said Claire, the tears forcing their way into her eyes; "I entreat. Have pity on me, Philippe. Be generous. Will you never weary of striking me to the heart? You have had revenge enough, be indulgent. If you will not alter the terms on which we live, at least deliver me from the duchess—protect me from the duke."

She sunk her voice as if ashamed that the last words should pass her lips.

"What is it you complain of?" said the iron-master. "I endure them—both of them; they are your relatives. What would the world say, this world to whose opinion you subordinate everything, if without any cause we should close our doors upon them? Life is not to be modified at the caprice of a spoiled child. Thrown both of us by yourself outside the beaten track, we can only walk straight on, since we have not the right to turn back."

"Then," said Claire, "I have nothing to expect of you—nothing to hope?"

"Nothing," said Philippe coldly; "and remember it is you who have willed it."

Claire looked up at her husband. A change had passed over the features of the iron-master. His eyes were deep-sunken and his face had become very pale, but his voice was firm. For an instant she thought of throwing herself at his feet, of opening her heart to him, of confessing that she loved him. She moved a step toward him with her arms extended vaguely, but a last remnant of pride arrested her, and with a sigh she stopped and stood motionless. Philippe came toward her.

"I am compelled to go to the factory," he said, calm as if nothing had passed between him and the wife whom he adored. "You will excuse me, will you not?"

"What shall I say to my brother?" she asked timidly.

"That I count upon his honor to say nothing of my refusal to Suzanne. I will arrange in the course of a week to send her away for a time."

And passing through the darkened cabinet, with an indifferent inclination of his head, he went out.

The young wife remained alone for some moments, abandoning herself without restraint to her grief, and measuring the full extent of her misfortune. It was then irrevocable. It was in vain that she had let Philippe see the bleeding wound in her heart; he had for her only a cold indifferent glance. She existed for him no longer. He had said it and he kept his word. He refused his pardon for her passing aberration. He repulsed her when she would approach him. She accused herself of having destroyed the future of her brother. It was through mistrust of the blood of the Beaulieus whose fatal violence he had proved, that he refusd Suzanne to Octave, and how was she to acquaint him with the wretched truth?

Suzanne's voice in the next room made her start up as suddenly as a deer that hears the barking of the hounds. She must not be surprised in her husband's cabinet in tears, and she hurried to her own chamber, and shut herself in. About two o'clock, when she had seen Suzanne disappear in the trees of the park, she set out on foot for Beaulieu.

The marquis, impatient to learn the result of the negotiation which his sister had undertaken, and satisfied that she would not leave him long in suspense, was walking on the terrace. He saw her approaching from a distance through the straight road leading to the chateau, walking slowly, with her head bent downward and forgetting to shade herself from the rays of the sun. Instead of the brisk movement of a bearer of good tidings, her attitude was languid and drooping. He advanced to meet her and they exchanged glances, the brother's anxious and troubled, the sister's gloomy and despondent.

"Mon Dieu! what has happened?' murmured Octave, seizing Claire's arm and leading her to a rond point surrounded with benches and commanding a beautiful prospect. A scent of flowering lindens pervading the atmosphere enervated Claire still further and she fixed her eyes, full of tears, tremblingly on her brother.

"Tell me, Claire, I beg, what is the matter?" said the marquis. "Speak, anything is better than your silence."

In compassion for his anxiety, she made an effort over herself.

"I have a sad reply for you, my dear brother," she said, "a marriage between Suzanne and you is impossible."

"Impossible! And why?"

Claire shook her head gloomily.

"Philippe refuses."

"What reason does he give?"

Claire was silent from extreme embarrassment. Could she tell her brother the secret of her dreary existence? What pretext could she invent that might seem to justify Philippe's refusal? She must answer, however, and without seeming to hesitate, Octave was looking at her, trying to read the truth in her face in her least movement.

"There was no reason. He refused to give one."

"No reason, no explanation?" said the marquis, in astonishment. "Philippe, whom I have loved so, does not hesitate to cause me such a grief!"

He sunk on a bench, much agitated, and concentrated his whole thoughts on the effort to guess this reason which Philippe would not give. Suddenly a light seemed to flash upon him. Money! it is a question of money. He was without fortune or position—that was surely Philippe's reason for refusing Suzanne to him. He rose quickly, took a few steps, and began talking to himself as if in reply to his own thought.

"Without position, it is true, but I will make one. Without fortune, but Philippe knows that may be won. I will do as he has done—"

"Without fortune! you?" Claire repeated.

Confused and embarrassed, Octave made an attempt to change the subject. Claire laid her hand on his shoulder, and looking straight in his eyes, said earnestly:

"What do you mean?"

"I imprudently spoke words which it was not meant for you to hear. You were ignorant of the loss of our suit and were never to have learned it. I have betrayed a secret that I had promised to keep."

But Claire had ceased to listen. She was thinking. The loss of the suit meant their ruin. If her brother was without fortune she was without dowry. A horrible suspicion crossed her mind. "When I married?" she said.

"The disaster was accomplished."

"And my huband—Philippe—did he know it?"

"He knew it, and forbade us to tell you. He showed an admirable delicacy and generosity."

Claire wrung her hands. "He did that! And I! oh! wretch that I am!"

There rose before her eyes a vision of the lofty chamber where on the tapestry hangings warriors were smiling in silence to the goddesses with the fire burning in the vast chimney-place on which she leaned shudderingly. And Philippe, pale and trembling almost at her feet, then raising his head proudly, when she said: "Take my fortune, let it be the ransom of my liberty."

Her fortune! How disdainfully he had smiled, she now knew why, and in her despair, the bitter humiliating truth rose to her lips. She must speak, she must accuse herself!

"Oh! I lied to you," she stammered, "when I said I did not know why he refused his sister to you. It was because of me!"

And with a sudden impulse she made to her brother her sad confession, dwelling on the enormity of her conduct. "And he!" she went on, "so proud, disinterested and good, for in his anger he spared me. He might have crushed me with a word, and he would not. And I—I heard him entreat, I saw him weep, and I remained immovable. I did not know what this heart contained of sincere, deep love!"

Transfigured by grief, radiant with passion:

"If you had not spoken, my existence would have been ruined, and it was chance that made you tell me!" She threw her arms around her brother, and embraced him in a tempest of gratitude, while words flowed from her lips like a torrent from a long pent-up stream.

"Claire, I beg you, calm yourself!" said Octave.

"Have no fear, all is saved," she resumed, in a state of exultation. "I will repair the harm I have done, you shall be happy. Oh! I will fall on my knees, nothing will be too hard for me. I was awkward this morning, I lost my self-command—I love him so!"

Her face clouded over as a recollection of the duchess returned to her.

"They shall not take him from me! He must return to me or I shall die!"

"Claire!" exclaimed the marquis. But with extreme mobility, she had passed from bitterness to joy.

"Don't be afraid," she said, laughing gayly. "To-morrow we are to receive, it is my *fête* day. I will be beautiful, and I will triumph, I am certain. I shall see him again at my side, trusting and tender."

Her nerves suddenly relaxed; she staggered and sunk into the arms of Octave, who led her to a bank of turf. She sobbed convulsively while Octave poured into her ears words of sympathy and consolation.

When she recovered her composure she sat in silence by the side of the marquis, gazing out at the fresh quiet valley with the river flowing through it. The park with its massive clumps of trees spread out to the foot of the hill dominated by the sharp turrets of the château. From the tall chimneys of the manufactory rose a dense trail of smoke against the sky, and the weather cock of the little church shone in the oblique rays of the setting sun.

It was in this peaceful corner that Claire dreamed of passing her life. She recalled how from that same spot she had once viewed the scene in anger and disdain. Now it represented Paradise to her. Philippe was there.

CHAPTER XVII.

SAINT CLAIRE'S day fell this year on a Sunday, and Saint Suzanne's, by a happy coincidence, the day before. Philippe, who always yielded to the necessities of his position, had not felt it possible to dispense with the celebration of this double anniversary. He had not received since his marriage. The spring was so far advanced before Claire had entirely recovered from her illness that there was pretext enough to justify in the eyes of the most suspicious the closing of his house. The invitations had been out for ten days when the wife's attempt at reconciliation seemed sharply to define the sad condition of affairs as chronic. It was with a heart filled with anguish, and a feeling of dissatisfaction with the world and himself, that the iron-master prepared to do the honors of Pont-Avesnes gayly.

Claire had shut herself up all the morning with the baroness, preparing for the event by reclining in a subdued light that she might look fresh. She bestowed as much attention upon her toilet as if she had been a courtesan bent upon making the conquest of a nabob. The dress she chose was white, trimmed with Valenciennes, and ornamented with natural roses. The corsage, half high in the back, and decolleté in front, revealed the whiteness of her neck, heightened by the bright garland of roses, which starting at the shoulder, descended to the edge of the skirt, encircling her in a fragrant coil. Her beautiful golden hair was massed high on her head boldly discovering the snowy nape of her neck, its only ornament a *piquet de roses du Roi.* She was so beautiful that Brigitte and Suzanne clapped their hands in admiration; and the last glance that Claire bestowed upon her mirror, was one of gratitude, and she shivered a little, for the time had come to make her appearance below.

In the Louis-Fourteenth salon, Philippe, in a black suit and white cravat, and the baron with the sleeve of his jacket rolled up, and his hands stained yellow, were talking together in the bright light of the lusters. The baroness, entering with Claire, uttered an exclamation of despair:

"Ah! *mon ami*, where do you come from in such a condition as this at such a time? And what hands!"

"Pardon me, *chère amie*," said the baron, reddening like a schoolboy caught in mischief, "I was rather late leaving the laboratory, and I accidentally upset a bath of iodine and stained my hands a little."

"A little!" exclaimed the baroness, "you are not fit to be seen; you look like a photographer. Don't come near me!" she exclaimed drawing back, "go dress yourself, quick! You have no time to lose."

The baron, happy at being let off so easily, disappeared like a sylph.

Philippe looked at Claire as she came forward in the splendor of her beauty, without a trace of anxiety on her face, and admired the spirit and resolution with which she performed her rôle. With a smile that made his young wife turn pale with joy, he advanced to

meet her, holding a jewel case in his hand on which were engraved the initials C. D.

"You are not very rich in jewelry," he said, bowing. "I did not at the time of our marriage procure all that I wished for you. Let me repair the omission now."

And he handed the case to Claire, who stood speechless and hesitating. The baroness seized it, and opening, drew from it a marvelous stream of diamonds which she shook and made sparkle in the light with exclamations of transport.

"Oh, my dear, see; it is a princely gift!"

Claire's face clouded. The gift was indeed princely; she thought of the forty thousand francs, the pretended revenues of her dowry, which lay upstairs in an ebony cabinet, and felt deeply humiliated as she contrasted with it the enormous value of the necklace. Money, which had been her supreme argument, her husband dispensed for her with royal indifference, though it had been won with the sweat of his brow.

"Come, Philippe, fasten the badge of slavery to her neck yourself. It is the least you can do," said the baroness. And, turning to her husband, who entered in irreproachable toilet, "You, my dear, who are always in search of little pebbles, try and find some like these."

The iron-master fastened the sparkling jewels on his wife's neck with hands that trembled as they lightly touched her satiny skin.

"Come, come," resumed the baroness, "on a day like this, the rule is to kiss."

And she pushed Claire into Philippe's arms.

The iron-master turned pale as death as he bent and touched his wife's brow with the coldest and the most longed-for of kisses. Then he suddenly passed into the adjoining salon.

Claire had never before had an opportunity to judge of the importance of her husband's position. Wherever he went she saw him welcomed with eager deference, but it was only in receiving in her own home all that was most considerable in the province that she understood the influence which the iron-master commanded. The dinner brought together M. Monicaud, the republican prefect, who understood how to moderate his opinions when he went into the world; the procureur-general, a grave, formal man; the treasurer, an old viveur, very genial; the commanding general of the department, together with all the authorities civil and military.

The metropolitan of Besançon, to whom Philippe had presented a handsome railing for the cathedral choir, had taken the trouble to attend, and the smiling old man, seated on Claire's right, braved the presence of the prefect of Doubs, who had implacably executed the decrees.

Athenaïs was devoured with envy. Sustained by her husband's notice, Claire's confidence returned to her, and she conversed with vivacity, finding the right word for each. She felt that Philippe admired her, and exerted all her intelligence to accomplish her one all-engrossing wish to please him.

The duke, dazzled by her brilliancy, watched her with an admiration which he made no attempt to conceal. His eyes were fixed on her without remarking that Philippe observed him threateningly.

Moulinet, engrossed though he was in ingratiating himself with the prefect, was struck with De Bligny's attitude. He had not failed to remark that the duke was far too much occupied with Claire. He attached no importance in general to the young man's affectations of gallantry, but in this case he was filled with apprehension.

The iron-master was a power, and on the eve of an election must be dealt with prudently. He resolved to remonstrate with his son-in-law.

The duchess, who was seated near Philippe, sought to attract his attention; but she found him cold and preoccupied. Obliged to dispense his civilities everywhere, and to be at the service of every one, he suffered all the torments of jealousy at seeing the duke's eyes fixed upon Claire, and felt as if her shoulders were being sullied with his imaginary caresses.

A tremendous anger got possession of him. Athenaïs' futile attempts to appear to absorb his attention wearied him, and he thought of his wife's prayer to be delivered from the duke and duchess; but to send away the duke was not enough for his wrath.

He felt relieved when dinner was ended. The air on the terrace was deliciously fresh, and there a charming surprise awaited Claire.

The park was illuminated, and the whole front of the chateau entwined with garlands of flowers. Moulinet had robbed his conservatory for the occasion, and presented a basket of rushes, plaited and gilded, three metres square, filled with beautiful varieties of orchids. But he did not lose sight of his son-in-law, who, having dexterously succeeded in blockading Claire in a corner, was pouring into her ears compliments and protestations to which she replied tremblingly, gradually raising her voice at the risk of drawing on them the attention of Philippe.

He smilingly placed himself between De Bligny and Claire, entering upon conversation with one of the commonplace remarks, which had the faculty of driving his son-in-law to the extremest pitch of exasperation.

"How bright it is to-night!" he said. "The moon is in her first quarter; we shall have fine weather all the week."

The duke eyed Moulinet askance, and Claire profited by the diversion to make her escape with a keen sense of relief.

De Bligny made a movement to follow her, but his father in-law, with a solemn gesture, stopped him, and led him off to the river.

"Monsieur the Duke," he said, "I regret to observe that you strangely abuse the good relations which I make it a point to maintain with the iron-master, to—"

"To—" repeated the duke, measuring Moulinet from head to foot, with unparalleled effrontery.

"In the first place," cried the ex-judge, losing patience, "be good enough, son-in-law," laying great stress upon this last to De Bligny, peculiarly unpleasant vocable, "be good enough to dispense with a certain jeering tone which I am not disposed to suffer."

"Monsieur Moulinet revolts, he raises the standard of the consular magistracy," said the duke, laughing.

"Monsieur Moulinet finds you altogether inconvenient," resumed the father-in-law, raising his voice, "with respect both to himself and to your host, whose wife you are scandalously paying court to."

"Has madame, your daughter, done me the honor to complain of it?" asked the duke, with an exaggerated politeness more irritating than his banter.

"Ma foi! no," said Moulinet; "she seems to be very little concerned about your fidelity, which it is easy to understand."

"Well, then?" said the duke.

Moulinet leaned toward him, and said, with a severely terrible glance:

"And morality, sir?"

"Oh! the morality of the Rue des Lombards!" replied the duke, carelessly.

Moulinet became consequential.

"The Rue des Lombards has its value," he said, eying the duke. "You are well acquainted with it."

"Fie! Monsieur Moulinet!" exclaimed the duke; "do not shake your sous in this fashion. Everybody knows you are rich. It is your one merit; do not abuse it."

"My merit, in that case, has the advantage over yours that it increases every day. For the rest, I am very good to interest myself in you. Pursue your guilty designs! You will obtain nothing but a quarrel with the husband, and I forewarn you that my sympathies will be his."

"Perfect!" said the duke.

"And if he kills you," he went on, growing more animated, "you will have got only your deserts."

"The judgment of Heaven!"

"My daughter and I will give you funeral obsequies worthy of our fortune, and will go to Monaco or the seaside to weep for you till the legal mourning has expired."

"A gay mourning, in other words."

"Brought about by your unbridled passions."

"Ah! Monsieur Moulinet, let us cease this!" interrupted the duke, haughtily. "I do not ask advice, or accept lessons. Your pedantical wisdom amused me for a time, but we have had enough of it."

"Very well, sir; do as you will. I wash my hands of you."

And, with a virtuous shake of his head, the father-in-law returned toward the salons.

A sensation had just been created on the terrace. Suzanne had hastened, quite out of breath, to her brother, who was conversing with the procureur-general and the prefect.

"There is a deputation of workmen here, who ask to speak to you."

"What is that?" exclaimed the prefect, "a little popular demonstration? Excellent!"

"Ah! it is you, Gobert!" said Philippe, who had gone to meet them, recognizing the oldest of his foremen in holiday dress, who held in his hand an enormous bouquet, and smiled uneasily. "Come on, my good man, and you, too, friends—"

Gobert, a tall, gray-haired old man, remained rooted to the same spot, petrified by the sight of all this elegant crowd who observed him curiously.

"Go on," murmured his comrades from behind; "you are spokesman."

But the man still stood with wide-open eyes, as if he had been changed to stone.

Suzanne broke the spell by advancing and taking the man prettily by the hand, led him to Claire.

His speech had been learned by heart, but in his agitation it would not come, and he simply bowed.

"Deign, madame," he said, at last, "to accept this bouquet, which I am commissioned to present in the name of my comrades, with our best wishes for your fête. There are eighteen hundred of us at the Pont-Avesnes, who owe everything to your husband. He has built our houses, our schools, and infirmary; he treats us as his children; and we wish to express our gratitude to you for the happiness which he owes to you."

Gobert's voice choked, so great was his emotion. Exclamations and applause broke out vociferously, the signal being given by the prefect with a smile of approbation to the young pair.

Claire shivered as the foreman spoke of Philippe's happiness. Everywhere, and from every one, words of mocking irony pursued her.

The tumult subsided, Gobert still stood rooted to the spot before M. and Mme. Derblay.

"But there is more to say," he resumed. "A deputy is about to be elected—"

At these words Moulinet advanced a step, as if he were now the person in question.

"And we have come to pray the patron to suffer his name to be brought forward in the department of the Pont-Avesnes."

At the last words Moulinet heaved a sigh of relief.

"The district adjoining mine," he exclaimed. "Bravo!"

A tempest of hurrahs and exclamations arising from the gate of the court, made echo to the words of the old foreman. The workmen from the factory and their wives and daughters, all in their Sunday best, were crowding the square witnessing from afar the demonstration they had prepared.

"Open the gate," said Philippe, "and let them enter!"

In another instant, a joyous stream had dispersed through the parterres, overflowing the park where the Venetian lanterns were illuminating with their many-colored lights the somber walks and mysterious rond-points.

"It was a happy thought of these good people," said the prefect. "Monsieur Derblay is one of ours, a liberal in the widest sense. His name signifies for all enlightenment, honesty, work, and liberty."

"That is a candidacy which shall have my support," said Moulinet. "We will divide the district. I shall set my farmers to work. Committees, reunions, speeches, I shall take charge of all that. We will carry the election with a high hand!"

"I accept, friend," said Phillipe, "the honor you have done me, not with ambitious ends, but hoping it may be in my power to serve you."

There was a great tumult. For one or two minutes nothing was

to be seen but arms, hats, and caps frantically waved. Then the noise suddenly ceased. Claire had advanced in her turn.

"For myself, friends," she said, "I thank you from my heart for your kind thought. And you, Gobert, come and kiss me for your comrades."

And smiling graciously she presented her cheek to the old foreman, who turning very red beneath his white hair, touched her face as cautiously as if it had been the red-hot iron he was used to hammer.

"Oh! madame," he said, "the Derblays have always been good, and you are worthy to be one of them."

Claire gave a glance of triumph toward her husband. The words of the workman seemed to reunite the links which bound her to Phillippe.

Athenaïs whispered sneeringly to La Brède and Du Tremblays,

"Is it not charming? We are swimming in socialism."

An acclamation cut short her words. Phillippe had given the order to roll several casks of wine to a rond-point of the park and had sent for the band. In a few moments more the musicians were sending forth the clamorous notes of their instruments from an improvised scaffolding. The vine-growers attracted by the noise had come to mingle with the factory hands, and the old hostility which had been wont to divide the county seemed about to disappear. The noisy tumultuous throng looked like a swarm of black ants in the broad walks beneath the trees with their somber verdure brightened into many gay hues by the lanterns.

Suddenly a stream of brilliant light flashed through the darkness as the first bomb of a display of fireworks secretly prepared by the baron burst in the air, throwing over the startled crowd a dazzling shower of stars. Rockets with fiery trains plowed the air, and the shrubbery was illumined with green and red Bengal lights. The musicians dropped their instruments to watch the capricious winding of the serpents, and the shooting of Roman candles. The prefect turning toward Moulinet remarked with animation,

"See what a fine display the red makes. What a handsome color!"

"I like the green too," replied the ex-judge who had not caught the allusion.

"It is the color of hope," said the treasurer-general, bowing graciously.

"Well, Monsieur Moulinet," said the baron, approaching, "all is going well? You seem enchanted."

"Yes, baron," replied the ex-judge expansively. "This luxury, gayety, and feasting delight me. I was born for high life. My tastes are a protest against the injustice of my birth—"

"Which your intelligence must cause every one to forget," said Préfont with his imperturbable sang-froid.

The sky was overspread with a brilliant red, upon a fiery column appeared a child defined in red light crowning a tall lady outlined in a silhouette of white light.

"Love crowning Industry," said the baron, who felt called upon to explain the emblem.

"I understand," muttered Monicaud in the procureur's ear. "Last

year at Neufchâtel we had the red infant and white lady to represent the 'Future crowning France.'"

"And I," said the treasurer, "saw the same figure at Ville d'Avray at the fête of Dr. Thomson, the celebrated accoucheur, as 'Infancy crowning Medicine.'"

A startling noise and a blinding light put a stop to all conversation. A sheet of fire shot upward and rested over the spectators like a vault. A hail of sticks fell on the heads of those nearest amid exclamations and laughter. Then it became dark again, and the park was softly lighted as before by the Venetian lanterns. As if the signal had been given by an invisible hand, the band struck up, sending out to the night wind the music of a quadrille. Then silence ensued, and a voice was heard:

"Take your places for a quadrille."

A sudden grisette caprice seized Athenaïs to join in the dance with the peasants, and she leaned toward Philippe.

"Oh! Monsieur Derblay, let us open the dance together. It would be charming. Come, you will dance with me!"

Philippe did not reply, hesitating between a desire to refuse and the fear to be impolite. He glanced toward Claire. She turned pale. A bantering voice, the detested voice of the duke, said in her ear:

'Do you see?" And he indicated Athenaïs leaning over Philippe with her eyes fixed on him.

Claire trembled with vexation and mortification. At the same moment her eyes met those of her husband and she read in them so plainly constraint and weariness, that it inspired her with a sudden resolution. She approached Athenaïs and touched her arm as she was repeating: "Will you not open the dance with me?"

"Pardon me if I counteract your plans, but I wish to speak to you."

"To me?" said the duchess, with surprise not unmingled with annoyance. "Immediately?"

"Immediately."

"The case is urgent then?"

"Quite so."

Athenaïs looked fixedly in her enemy's face. Claire sustained her regard with so much firmness that the duchess presaged that a catastrophe was impending, and lowering her eyes:

"What is it, dear?" she said softly, attempting to take Claire's hand.

"Follow me and you shall know," said Mme. Derblay. And she led Athenaïs into a small deserted salon.

They remained standing for a moment, and facing each other like adversaries who are about to decide a quarrel by a trial of main force.

"Will you have a seat?" asked Mme. Derblay.

"It will be long then?" half suppressing a discourteous yawn.

"I hope not," replied Claire.

Athenaïs seated herself in an arm-chair with one foot thrown forward, and fixed her eyes upon the jet on the toe of her shoe, moving it to and fro in the light with an air of perfect indifference to what Claire might have to say.

"I have a favor to ask of you."

"Am I so fortunate as to have it in my power to serve you?" inquired Athenaïs with nonchalance.

"Yes. The other day when you carried off my husband at the hunt you inquired whether it annoyed me, and whether I was not jealous."

"I was jesting only."

"You were wrong then for what you said was true."

Athenaïs, astonished, dropped her listless attitude, and began to hold herself on her guard.

"You jealous?" she said.

"Yes."

"Of me?"

"Of you!" repeated Claire, and with a forced smile added, "You see I am frank. My husband is occupied with you more than I like, and I appeal to you to put an end to attentions to which you attach no importance and which annoy me."

"Oh! dear child," exclaimed Athenaïs, turning to Claire with animation, and full of a tender interest, "what! you have been suffering and have kept silent. But do you not exaggerate a trifle? I remember nothing that could have caused your annoyance. Monsieur Derblay is very amiable, he appears to find pleasure in talking to me, but a sympathy like ours between members of one family is neither surprising nor criminal."

"It pains me nevertheless," persisted Claire.

"It is from your husband that you should seek a remedy for your distemper, my dear friend; I can do nothing."

"Yes, you can put a stop to this intimacy."

Athenaïs sunk again languidly in her chair. She began to perceive Claire's meaning. It was a disarmament that she requested of her. Moderating the harsh tones of her voice to a blandness which was more exasperating than her previous harshness.

"And how? By being ungracious to your husband? That would impose a very disagreeable rôle upon me. Besides, do you believe the means would be efficacious?"

She smiled the vaunting smile of a woman satisfied of her ascendency.

"That," said Claire quietly, "is not what I was about to propose."

"What, then?"

Mme. Derblay hesitated a moment. Then, boldy:

"That you should absent yourself for a time from our house."

"Athenaïs started: "Do you mean that?"

"Yes," said Claire, with a voice as gentle as her rival's was sharp. "I ask it as a favor. Think, if you will, that I am mad, but it involves my happiness."

"And under what pretext shall I absent myself? What will the world say of a separation so abrupt as to have the appearance of a quarrel?"

"We will devise satisfactory pretexts for it."

Athenaïs was embarrassed by Claire's persistence. She found Mme. Derblay stronger than she had believed, and reflecting that if the least concession should be made all was lost, she had recourse to energetic measures.

"We might not succeed," she said, "and it would be prejudicial to me. You have been frank. I will be so also. I am new to the world into which the Duke de Bligny has introduced me, and I wish to preserve the place I have made for myself in it. But it is an exacting one, and if my husband's family turned their backs upon me, jealousy would find gratification in discussing me—and adieu my dreams! If you have your love, I have my ambition. I understand your wish to protect the one; suffer me to protect the other."

Claire began to tremble with indignation. She felt a desire to seize the wretch and crush her.

"Then you refuse?" she said in a stifled voice.

"Against my will, but in conscience put yourself in my place."

The irony was so pointed that Athenaïs could not repress a smile.

"Put myself in your place!" exclaimed Claire with vehemence. "It is you who have put yourself in mine. You have pursued me with your hate since I first knew you. As a girl you robbed me of my betrothed, as a wife you try to rob me of my husband. You have taken the one, you shall not take the other!"

"Ah!" said Athenaïs, livid with rage, "let us raise our masks then, for in truth so much dissimulation oppresses me! Yes, from my childhood I have returned in hatred all that I have received from you, and such as you, in disdain. For ten years you have crushed me with your name, your fortune, and your wit. To-day I am a duchess, I have millions and you come humbly to solicit a favor at my hands."

"Take care!" said Claire, "I come of a race that does not submit tamely to insult."

"And I bear a name which places me beyond reach of your anger."

"I will make an appeal against your conduct to me."

"To whom?"

"To the world."

"To which? To yours to which I have risen, or to mine to which you have descended."

"To whichever holds respect for others a duty, and self-respect a right. Before that world I will repeat what I have said to you, I will exhibit you as you are, and we shall see whether the name you bear will shelter your baseness and perfidy."

"It is a scandal, then, that you wish," Athenaïs hissed between her teeth.

"It is an execution that I intend. For the last time, will you assent to my request?"

"No, a hundred times, no," replied Athenaïs, grinding her teeth.

"Then you shall see!"

Steps were heard on the sand, and a sound of merry voices came to them through the windows. Philippe appeared on the stairs with the baroness on his arm. The duke, laughing with La Brède, followed, and lastly Moulinet who had attached himself to the baron. As they entered, Claire and Athenaïs stood confronting each other, pale and trembling in an attitude so defiant that they all paused in astonishment.

"Duke," said Claire, advancing and designating Athenaïs with a

gesture of withering contempt, "take your wife away, if you do not wish me to drive her from here in presence of everybody."

De Bligny stood impassible, the ghost of a smile wandering over his lips. But Moulinet unable to believe his ears, darted forward and tossing up his arms:

"Drive away my daughter—the duchess—my daughter!" he repeated, as if the armorial bearings of all France had been outraged in her person.

Athenaïs turned to the duke, and said in piercing tones:

"Monsieur, will you suffer me to be insulted in this manner without defending me?"

De Bligny advanced a step toward Philippe.

"Do you approve, sir, of what Madame Derblay has said to the duchess? Are you ready to apologize, or do you sustain her?"

Claire fixed her eyes in agony on her husband. Was he going to defend or disown her? She had never yet suffered as she did in this second of horrible uncertainty.

The iron-master had advanced toward De Bligny as he spoke, his tall figure drawn up, towering a head over the duke's and bowing:

"Monsieur the Duke," he said, "whatever Madame Derblay has done, and for whatever reason she has done it, I hold it for well done."

The duke bowed with elegance, and making a sign to La Brède.

"I understand," he said. And offering his arm to Athenaïs, he left the room followed by La Brède and the bewildered Moulinet.

"A devilish business!" muttered La Brède. "Two cousins—De Bligny has received the insult, and will choose pistols. The iron-master is a dead man!"

Claire, as she witnessed the departure of her rival, had no thought of the terrible consequences of her bold stroke. She approached her husband with a cry of triumph, and in a passion of gratitude.

"Oh! thank you, Philippe!" and she stretched out her arms vaguely.

But her ardor immediately subsided. Her husband had grown impassible.

"You owe me no thanks," he said. "In defending you, I defended my own honor."

Seeing that she had relapsed into despondency and silence: "Do not forget," he added, "that we have guests, and that no one must suspect what has passed."

He offered his arm to the baroness whose nerves were so shaken that she was uncertain whether to laugh or cry. Claire dashed aside a tear, and with a sad smile to the baron who had remained near her:

"Come," she said, "since it must be, let us dance."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE night was cruelly long to Claire. When she found herself in her own room the gravity of the situation rushed upon her and she grew terrified. Certainly it had been but a simple exercise of her right to revolt and drive away the woman who defied, threatened, outraged her in her own house. But her husband had

been forced to sustain her, and it had involved him in a quarrel with the duke. She knew that De Bligny was not an adversary to be despised. If an encounter should result, would not Philippe's life be in terrible danger? She had seen Octave and the baron conferring with La Brède and Moulinet toward the end of the evening, and on questioning them had received evasive answers. A superstitious dread seized her that this union between the iron-master and herself was ill fated, a presentiment that if her husband fought he would be killed, and terrible images haunted her thoughout the night.

She saw Philippe lying lifeless and blood-stained on the turf, and the duke, with his reeking pistol in his hand, laughing his evil laugh. Why the pistol? She vainly assured herself that the weapon, chosen would be the sword, she still saw the two men with pistols in their hands, she heard the double report, she saw a light smoke ascend, and heard Philippe fall heavily on the sod.

She walked to the window, hoping to shake off the waking nightmare which pursued her. The air was soft, the clear night sparkling with stars. The expiring Venetian lanterns animated for an instant by the breeze blazed out in the darkness. The red spots seemed to her excited fancy spots of blood, and with a shiver she closed the window and drew the curtains to shut out the sinister light.

She began pacing her chamber, but her mind reverted incessantly to the thought of Philippe's death. "I bring misfortune to all who approach me," she said aloud, and the sound of her own voice in the silence terrified her. She sunk into a long chair and tried to read, but the pendulum of the clock sounded in her ears a funeral knell.

Then it came into her mind to go and find out what Philippe was doing, and crossing the little salon on tiptoe, she gained the door of his chamber. All was dark and silent. Concluding that he was asleep, and a little reassured by the thought, she returned to her room.

Philippe was not in his chamber, nor was he asleep. He had shut himself up in his cabinet on the ground-floor beneath the room occupied by Claire. He well recognized the gravity of the coming encounter between the duke and himself. The preliminaries had been all arranged between the seconds, and in spite of the tearful entreaties of Moulinet, a meeting was to take place at eight the next morning in the woods between Pont-Avesnes and Varenne, at the same rond-point which a few days before had resounded with gayety and mirth. The weapon chosen by the duke was the pistol, the distance thirty paces, and Philippe offered no objection. Though he had had little practice with the pistol, he was an excellent shot with the gun, and certain of his aim, he reflected with joy that if he risked his own life, his adversary's was in his power. Between these two men of equal courage and coolness it was impossible to predict the victor, but there seemed little doubt that one of the two was condemned to death.

Seated there alone and knowing that he had perhaps but a few hours to live, Philippe made an honest scrutiny of his conduct. The idea that held possession of his mind was the thought that he had perhaps been too severe with Claire. He felt a profound pity for

this poor troubled heart which had so deeply suffered, and which he now knew to be filled with himself. The trial to which he had subjected her was complete, there remained no room to doubt that living, Claire would be entirely his, or dead, devoted to his memory. The end he had been seeking he had gained, and he felt calm.

He could not, in his heart, feel regret that he had hammered this character of bronze and fashioned it to his will. In the result obtained there was a guarantee for Claire's happiness if chance favored him, and he returned alive. If left to herself, she would with certainty have been unhappy. Too intelligent not to be conscious that she had wrecked her existence, and too proud to admit that the fault had been hers, she would have lived the prey to a bitter vindictiveness, and soured by vain regrets. The lesson he had given her had been salutary. He had recovered, reconquered this heart, and the time had come when they might be happy.

The sound of footsteps over his head made him start. He listened. It was a regular measured tread, and in each vibration of the ceiling he could divine his young wife's agitation. He saw her with tearless eyes, contracted features, and trembling hands, with the look on her face that he knew so well in the frenzy of her sorrow or anger. For the first time he felt that his love made him weak. His temples throbbed. He felt a well-nigh irrepressible longing to fly to the wife whom he adored, and who was not his. Would it not be madness to risk death without having once held her in his arms, without having pressed his lips in the perfumed tresses of her golden hair? A night of love might be his, perhaps to know no morrow. He laid his hand on the knob of the door and there he paused.

Could it be indeed he who was on the point of yielding to such a weakness? After all the suffering endured, was he about to give way at the last? It was his whole future that was at stake. If he survived, Claire was his without distrust in the present, or fear for the future. If he died he would remain in her eyes great, strong, and proud. It should be all or nothing; a whole lifetime of happiness—or death, silent and cold.

Over his head, Claire continued her feverish walk. He heard her open the door, cross the salon, and with furtive step approach his chamber. He smiled and listened attentively. In another minute she recrossed the salon and returned to her apartment. She too then had thought of a reconciliation, and had recoiled. He felt how, in going to her he would have fallen from the height of his superiority to become a mere vulgar being at the mercy of his senses.

A pale light, announcing the break of day, recalled him to the material concerns that should occupy his last moments. His sister was to be provided for. He fully recognized the good qualities of the marquis; it had been with the purpose of being true to his conjugal tactics that he had refused Suzanne to Octave. The final crisis was drawing near, and he had promised himself that at the last moment he would redress the wrong that had been done to Octave, and also to Suzanne, who loved him. And at the thought of causing a grief to this child who had been the solace of his life, his heart melted. He wished to add solemnity to his consent to their union by giving it a testamentary form. He made his dispositions with composure and self-collectedness, making an equal division of his fortune be-

tween Suzanne and Claire, praying "his dear wife to accept it as a testimonial of his deep affection." He chose from among his engineers a manager capable of supplying his place, and having provided for everything, lay down on a large leather divan and prepared for a few minutes of sleep.

At Varenne the excitement was intense. Athenaïs returned from Pont-Avesnes in a state of indescribable rage. At the moment when the woman she hated seemed vanquished and at her mercy, she had risen, haughty and triumphant, and it was she, the Duchess de Bligny, who was humiliated, expelled, defeated! For this rupture would do her an irreparable injury. All the duke's family would espouse the side of Claire. The cause of the meeting and the grounds of her expulsion would be rehearsed, commented on, and exaggerated by a society which detested her. Athenaïs ground her teeth at the thought; she felt consumed with a thirst for bloodshed. She would have wished to take the duke's place that the bloody work might be better and surer. She drew a picture of Claire in her widow's dress, pale and weeping, cursing the hour in which she had outraged her. By striking the husband whom she loved she would poison the springs of her life. She burst into a frightful laugh as she flung her glasses and fan violently on the table, and turning to her father and husband, who regarded her silently:

"This man must be killed!" she said with rage.

There was a moment of stupefaction; Moulinet aghast at his daughter's tragic vehemence and the duke astonished to find her hatred equal to his own. He was vexed, however, that she had brought about an explosion resulting in a humiliating retreat for them both, and blamed her want of self-command. Habituated to the masks of politeness in his own world, to rancors concealed beneath smiles, Athenaïs appeared in his eyes fearfully vulgar and maladroit, while her Borgia attitude vexed him. He looked at her quietly, and said in a careless tone:

"Kill this man! You speak quite coolly, my dear. Such phrases sound well enough in melodrama, but in every-day life are to the last degree absurd. Try and leave off displaying long words and long arms!" Then with a cold smile. "However, I shall do my best to satisfy you."

"Listen, Monsieur the Duke," said Moulinet, rousing himself from a labored meditation. "I see you are disposed to push matters to extremity—"

"Did you not hear your daughter, dear sir?" said De Bligny, coldly. "Do you consider me so unmindful of my duties as not to defend my wife?"

"That is not the question. You have acted with perfect propriety, I admit. But my daughter is mad to urge you to violence, she should exhort you to conciliation. All may yet be arranged. A trifling quarrel between cousins who shake hands and all is made up. But a duel—a scandal, a rupture—do you appreciate the consequences? For you they are tremendous—and for me! You ruin my election."

Despite the gravity of the situation the duke could not repress a laugh. Athenaïs emitted a disdainful hiss from the arm-chair where she had coiled herself up like a viper.

"Pardon me, Monsieur the Duke," resumed Moulinet, "but I have done enough for you to be a little exacting in my turn. This affair must be arranged. Every day such things occur, and end in an accommodation. It is an easy matter. A little *procès-verbal* will be drawn up by which Madame Derblay retracts her words, and you, son-in-law, will withdraw your challenge. Each of you withdrawing something, there will be nothing remaining but—"

"But to withdraw ourselves," said the duke.

"Which is often done."

"Not in the case of persons like Monsieur Derblay and me. Take my advice, Monsieur Moulinet, impose silence on your too sensitive heart, stifle the lamentations of your threatened candidacy, and let things take their course. I must bid you good night, I have to speak to La Brède before retiring."

And bowing tranquilly to his wife and father-in law, the duke left the room.

Moulinet drew a little nearer Athenaïs. "Let us see, my dear child," he stammered.

The duchess rose, cold and pale, and without looking at him opened the door leading to her chamber and vanished. Moulinet shook his head despondently, and for the first time confessed to himself that difficulties existed for which money could not find a remedy.

"Night brings counsel," he said to himself. "To-morrow we will see more clearly." And clinging to a vague hope he went to his chamber and stretched himself out on his Emperor Charles Fifth bedstead.

The iron-master had slept for two hours when a light touch on his shoulder aroused him. He opened his eyes and saw the Marquis de Beaulieu standing over him. He sprung up quickly. It was broad daylight. The hands of the clock pointed to half past six.

"We have time!" he murmured.

Never had he felt freer and stronger in body and mind. To this man of will everything that evidenced to him his mortal strength was a secret delight. He walked to the window and opened it. The air was pure and fresh, laden with the delicious perfume of flowers damp with dew. His eyes wandered over the dense shrubbery of the park. A light transparent blue mist floated over the trees, the river already sparkled in the sun, now high in the heavens. Nature seemed adorned for a fête.

"A beautiful day!" he exclaimed, gayly, as if about to set out on a hunt.

His glance met that of Octave, and he read a silent reproach in his eyes. The iron-master approached his brother-in-law, and pressed his hand affectionately.

"Do not be astonished to see me careless and almost gay this morning. I feel a presentiment that it will end well for me." And becoming grave he added, "However, we must provide against mischance, and my arrangements are all completed. You will find them recorded in this letter."

And he pointed to a letter on his table addressed to Bachelin.

"My old friend and you will be my executors. To you, Octave, I leave what is dearest to me."

A flash of joy illumined the face of the marquis. His voice choked, and throwing his arms around Philippe he sobbed on his shoulder.

"Come, a little more firmness, Octave. I hope it will be from my hand that you will receive your sister. But if it should be otherwise, my friend, love her well, for she deserves it. Hers is a tender heart that the least sorrow would break."

His voice grew infinitely soft as he spoke of the sister to whom he had been a real father. Passing his hand over his forehead he recovered his composure.

"I must dress; will you go upstairs with me, and then we will go together to find the baron. I wish to leave here without attracting attention."

Octave bent his head without replying, then after a moment's silence, with an effort:

"Philippe," he said, "before seeing you, I saw my sister. Promise me that you will not go without seeing her."

Philippe looked at the marquis inquiringly.

"You cannot surely leave her without giving her at least an opportunity to justify herself to you if it is possible."

And as the iron-master made a sudden movement of surprise.

"I have known for three days what has passed between you and Claire. I know what my sister's fault has been; I am grieved, believe me, for the disappointment you have suffered, as much as I admire you for having been able so well to conceal it. But be indulgent to her, I implore you. It would be unworthy of you to overwhelm her with despair. Reflect that she may never see you again. Do not leave her with the double remorse of having desolated your life and perhaps of having caused your death."

The iron-master turned away his face, which had grown very pale.

"I will do as you ask," he said, "but the interview will be terribly painful to us both. Do what you can to shorten it, and facilitate my departure by coming for me."

The marquis made a sign of acquiescence, and pressing Philippe's hand, they went out together.

CHAPTER XIX.

The baroness, coming early in the morning to Claire's room found her after the agitation of the night in a state of torpor. On speaking to her she failed to elicit a reply. Claire sat in a long chair with contracted features and a settled stare, as if all the life that was in her was concentrated upon some frightful vision. Each stroke of the clock announcing the passing of the hours made her start. But for this movement, and for the wild light in her eyes it might have been supposed that she slept.

The arrival of her brother aroused her. She had concentrated all her hopes upon the passionate wish to see Philippe before his departure. She had charged Octave with obtaining this favor for her,

and then she waited, walking to the window and raising the curtain to discover whether Philippe were setting off, and when she did not see him at the door at listen for his coming.

Suddenly a sound of footsteps made her draw back as though she shrunk from finding herself face to face with him whom she so longed to see. She turned pale, a dark shade gathered about her eyes, and signing to the baroness to leave her, she stood trembling and voiceless. Philippe entered.

They stood looking at each other speechless, he examining the traces of anguish on the face of his young wife, she striving to collect her thoughts and discovering nothing in her agitated brain but emptiness.

Unable to endure the painful silence longer, she drew near Philippe, seized his hand, and covered it with tears and kisses.

The iron-master had anticipated an explanation, had prepared himself for prayers and entreaties. This silent abandonment of grief unmanned him. He made an effort to withdraw the hand upon which the woman he loved was raining hot tears, but he could not. He shivered and felt himself without strength to resist his weakness.

"Claire!" he said, in a low voice, "I beg you! You agitate me, and I need all my self-command. Be calm, I entreat. Be strong, and spare me if you value my life."

She raised her head. The expression of her face changed.

"Your life! Ah! I would give my own a thousand times rather. Wretch that I am to have endangered you by my rashness! I ought to have endured everything. By suffering I might have expiated my wrongs toward you, but in a moment of folly I forgot everything. This duel is madness—it must not be—I will prevent it."

"How?" asked Philippe, knitting his brow.

"By sacrificing my pride to save you. I will humble myself to the duchess, if necessary I will see the duke—there is yet time."

"I forbid it!" said the iron-master, with energy. "You bear my name and your humiliation is mine. Lastly, think if you can how I hate the man who has caused all my misfortune. For a year I have dreamed of finding myself confronted with him. Oh! this, believe me, is a welcome day!"

Claire bowed her head. She had long accustomed herself to obey when Philippe commanded. Calmed by this outburst, he went on:

"I appreciate your intentions, and thank you for them. There has been from the first a misunderstanding between us which has cost us both much suffering. I do not hold you entirely to blame; I failed to comprehend you. I did not know how to make sacrifice enough for you, I loved you so. But I would not leave you with the thought that I have preserved any bitter feeling toward you. In your turn, pardon me for all the ill I have done you, and bid me farewell."

Claire's face grew radiant, and with a passion of gratitude:

"Pardon you! I!" she exclaimed. "Do you not see that I adore you? Have you not long ago read it in my eyes, in my voice—"

She drew close to him, and twining her beautiful arms round his neck, and dropping her blonde head on his shoulder, intoxicating him with her perfume, with her glances, she spoke as if in a dream:

"Ah! do not leave me. If you knew how I love you! Stay, stay

with me—all mine, my own. We are so young, we have so much time left to be happy. What are this man and woman whom we hate to us? We will forget them; let us go away, far away from here. There will be happiness, life and love!"

Philippe disengaged himself gently from her embrace.

"Here," he said, simply, "are duty and honor."

The young wife uttered a groan. The frightful reality had once more seized her imagination. She saw again the duke with his reeking pistol, laughing a malevolent laugh.

"No! no!" she cried.

At the same moment Octave appeared in the door, beckoned to Philippe, and withdrew. Claire saw that the moment of departure had come, that all was over, and throwing her arms round her husband, she embraced him convulsively.

"Farewell," murmured the iron-master.

"Oh! do not leave me thus!" she said, "not with that icy word. Tell me you love me, do not go till you have said it."

Philippe remained immovable. He had said that he pardoned, he would not confess that he loved. He disengaged himself and walked toward the door, turning as he was about to quit the room:

"Pray that I may return alive," he said, throwing out these words as a supreme hope.

This was all. The wife uttered a cry which brought the baroness to her in haste, as the carriage which bore away the iron-master rumbled over the avenue.

Paying no heed to the presence of the baroness, Claire sunk back in a chair, and buried her head in the cushions to shut out all sight and sound, wishing she could suspend her existence during the awful hour that was approaching. She had remained thus for several minutes when a soft voice aroused her:

"May I come in?"

Claire exchanged a glance of distress with the baroness. She must dissemble and assume a smiling face before Suzanne, who was still ignorant of what had passed. Her face appeared in the door, fresh and bright.

"Come in, dear," said Claire, with a mighty effort forcing a smile.

"What! you are not dressed!" exclaimed Suzanne, seeing her sister-in-law in her dressing-gown. "I have ridden through the park in the little carriage."

She was pattering up and down the chamber with the liveliness of a young kitten: "And I met Philippe, with the baron and Monsieur Octave, in a close carriage. Where could they have been going?"

Claire turned red and pale at once. Every word of Suzanne's was a torture. Drops broke out on her forehead.

"Oh! if my husband was with them," said the baroness, "they must have an experiment at hand—a visit to the quarries."

"Which way were they going?" asked Claire, in a trembling voice.

"Toward the ponds. To Varenne, perhaps?"

"Oh no," said the baroness, "the duke is not a man to rise before ten."

Claire heard no more. They were going to the ponds. The glade

with its soft turf, its white fence and the waters sleeping beneath the trees, rose before her. This desolate spot was propitious for a duel, the dreariness of its aspect seemed to destine it for some tragic scene. There it was that the duke and Philippe would fight. She was sure of it; she could see it all.

"You used the little carriage? Where did you leave it?" she asked.

"In the stable-yard. They are probably unhitching it now."

"I shall take it for a little drive," said Claire, quickly.

And slipping into a dress and throwing a lace scarf over her head, she went out in haste.

She set off rapidly, driving with a sure hand. The motion, far from calming, excited her. In a frenzy of impatience she set the horse into a gallop, dashing violently over the forest road, which threatened to smash everything to pieces, biting her lips and envying the wings of the birds, listening with breath suspended by the beatings of her heart for the report of a pistol.

The forest was silent. Far off, the bells of carriages on the highway tinkled merrily. The soft moss carpet muffled the sound of her horse's footsteps. She sprung out and hastened across the woods, an instinct warning her that she was nearing the spot. She listened and heard voices.

At the distance of twenty paces from the pond stood M. Moulinet's Chinese kiosk, mirrored in the waters. From thence Claire might see without being seen. Lightly as a hunted hind she glided through the trees, and ascending the steps leading to the circular gallery, paused, anxious and terrified.

In the middle of the rond-point, the baron was marking off the distance with long strides. La Brède was loading the weapons, assisted by Moulinet, pale and discomposed. Philippe, at the further end of the glade, was walking slowly and talking with Octave and the doctor. The duke stood a few paces from the kiosk munching a cigar, with a rush cane in his hand with which he mechanically struck the tall stems of foxglove. Claire recalled with a horrible pressure at her heart this same rond-point, filled with horsemen and groups of elegantly dressed women, and the buffet served by the solemn valets of Varenne, a gay and brilliant scene. She was jealous then, but what was her jealousy to the torture which she was enduring now? Another instant and one of the two men who sought each other's lives for her sake would be stretched on the green turf.

A mist passed before her eyes, and she had to cling to the balustrade for support. But her weakness did not last long. She looked again, breathless, and with a horrible curiosity.

The adversaries had taken their places. M. Moulinet had just called out in supplicating accents: "Gentlemen, I beg you, gentlemen!" and was led away by La Brède and lectured in a corner. Octave handed Philippe his weapon and retired.

"Gentlemen, are you ready?" asked La Brède, and was answered by a simultaneous "Yes."

La Brède resumed slowly, "One—two—three—fire!"

Claire saw the pistols leveled, and in this supreme moment her reason forsook her. She sprung forward with a cry, descended at a

single bound from the kiosk, and flinging herself in front of the weapon aimed at Philippe, stopped the barrel with her white hand.

There was an explosion. Claire turned pale as death, and waving frantically her torn and bloody hand, bespattered the duke's face with warm red drops. Then with a sigh she fainted away.

There was a moment of indescribable confusion. The duke had drawn back in horror as he felt the warm, crimson shower. Philippe sprung forward, and raising Claire like an infant, transported her to the carriage which was waiting at the terminus of the road.

Claire's eyes were closed. Anxiously the iron-master, assisted by the physician, raised the poor mutilated hand that suffered for him and kissed it with adoration. The physician felt it with the delicate skill of a woman.

"There is nothing broken," he said at last with relief. "We shall come off better than could have been hoped. The hand will be scarred, but that may be concealed by a glove."

And recovering his professional sang-froid, he began arranging the cushions of the carriage to make the patient more comfortable.

Philippe's eyes never quitted Claire. Her prolonged insensibility made him uneasy. The baron, accompanied by La Brède, recalled him to a sense of the situation.

"I am charged, sir, by the Duke de Bligny," said the last, "to express his profound regret for the catastrophe of which he is the cause. He is deeply distressed at the accident to Madame Derblay, and finds his ideas greatly modified. It seems now impossible to proceed with the affair. The courage of my friend is beyond dispute, as is yours also, monsieur. We give our word of honor that the secret of what has passed shall be faithfully kept."

The iron-master glanced toward the duke. De Bligny, trembling and livid, was leaning against the fence mechanically wiping his face, his handkerchief each time marked with a crimson stain. As he thought that his ball might have wounded Claire mortally, might have entered her beautiful brow or her white bosom, his conduct presented itself to him in its true light, and he made a vow to remove forever from the path of the woman to whom he had brought so much suffering.

La Brède continued talking to Philippe with an emotion that was not usual with him. Philippe vaguely understood that he was expressing to him his personal regrets. He suffered his hand to be pressed, and seeing the duke move off, accompanied by Moulinet, hurried the physician into the carriage, and mounting the box, took the reins and set off rapidly.

In the great tapestried chamber where goddesses were filling the cups of warriors, as during Claire's long illness Philippe was seated in silence at the foot of her bed.

Claire had not recovered consciousness and was tossing on her pillow in a high fever. She opened her eyes and looked vaguely around for Philippe. The iron-master rose quickly and bent over her. A smile broke over her lips, she wound a bare arm around her husband's neck, and drew him toward her. Her excited brain had as yet but an indistinct recollection of what had taken place. She seemed to be floating immaterial in celestial space. A delicious

languor had crept over her. So low that Philippe hardly heard, she murmured:

"I am dead, am I not, my beloved, and dead for you! How happy I am! You smile on me, you love me. I am in your arms. How sweet death is! What an adorable eternity!"

The sound of her own voice aroused her suddenly. A severe pain shot through her hand. All came back to her, her despair, her anguish and her sacrifice.

"No! I am alive!" she exclaimed.

She shrunk back, and looking at Philippe as if life and death hung on his answer:

"One word only!" she said. "Do you love me?"

Philippe turned upon her a face radiant with happiness.

"Yes," he answered. "There are two women in you. The one who has made me suffer so much is no more. You are she whom I have never ceased to adore."

Claire uttered a cry. Her eyes filled with tears, she clung desperately to Philippe, their lips met, and with a thrill of joy they exchanged their first kiss of love.

THE END.

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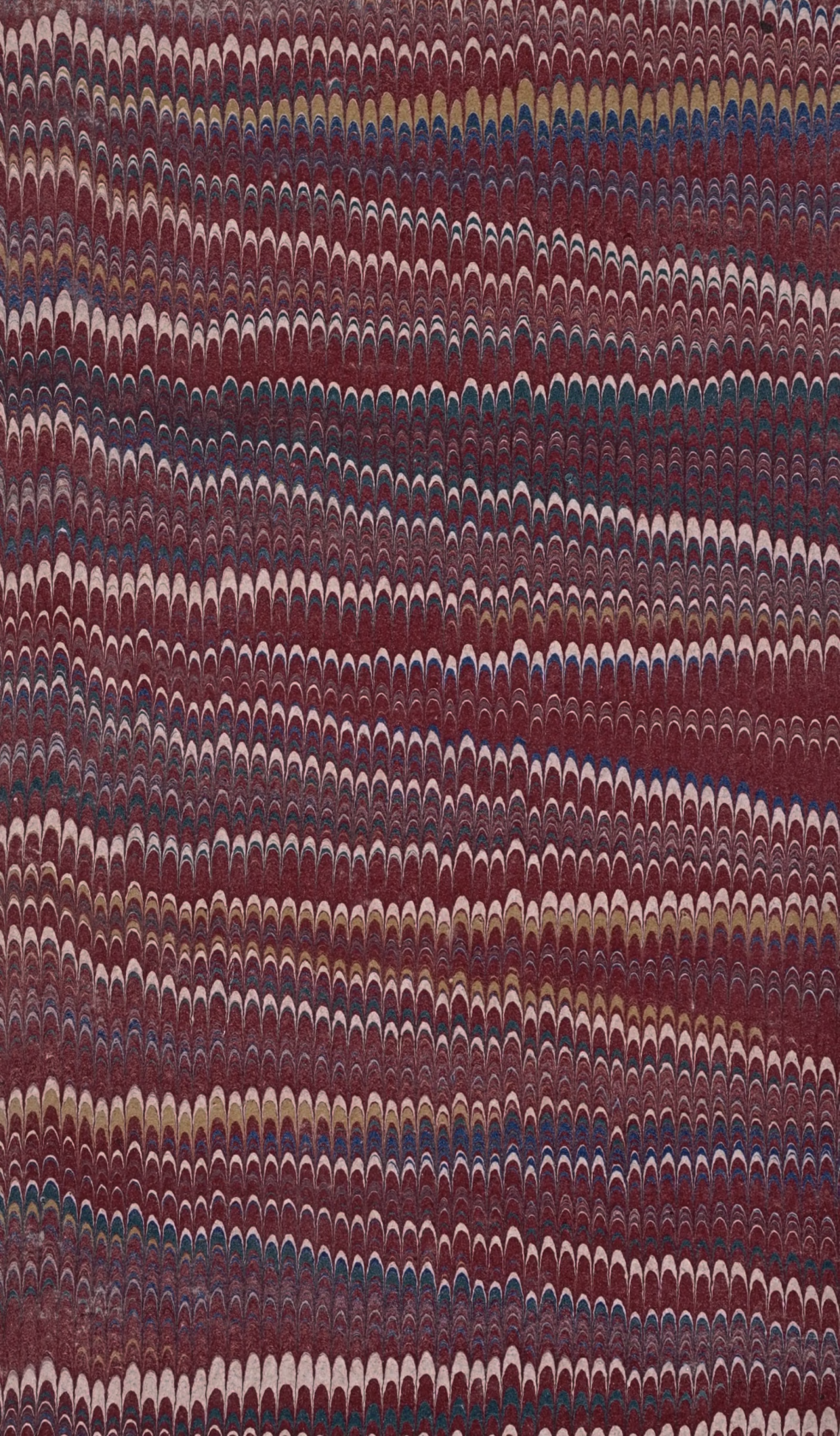

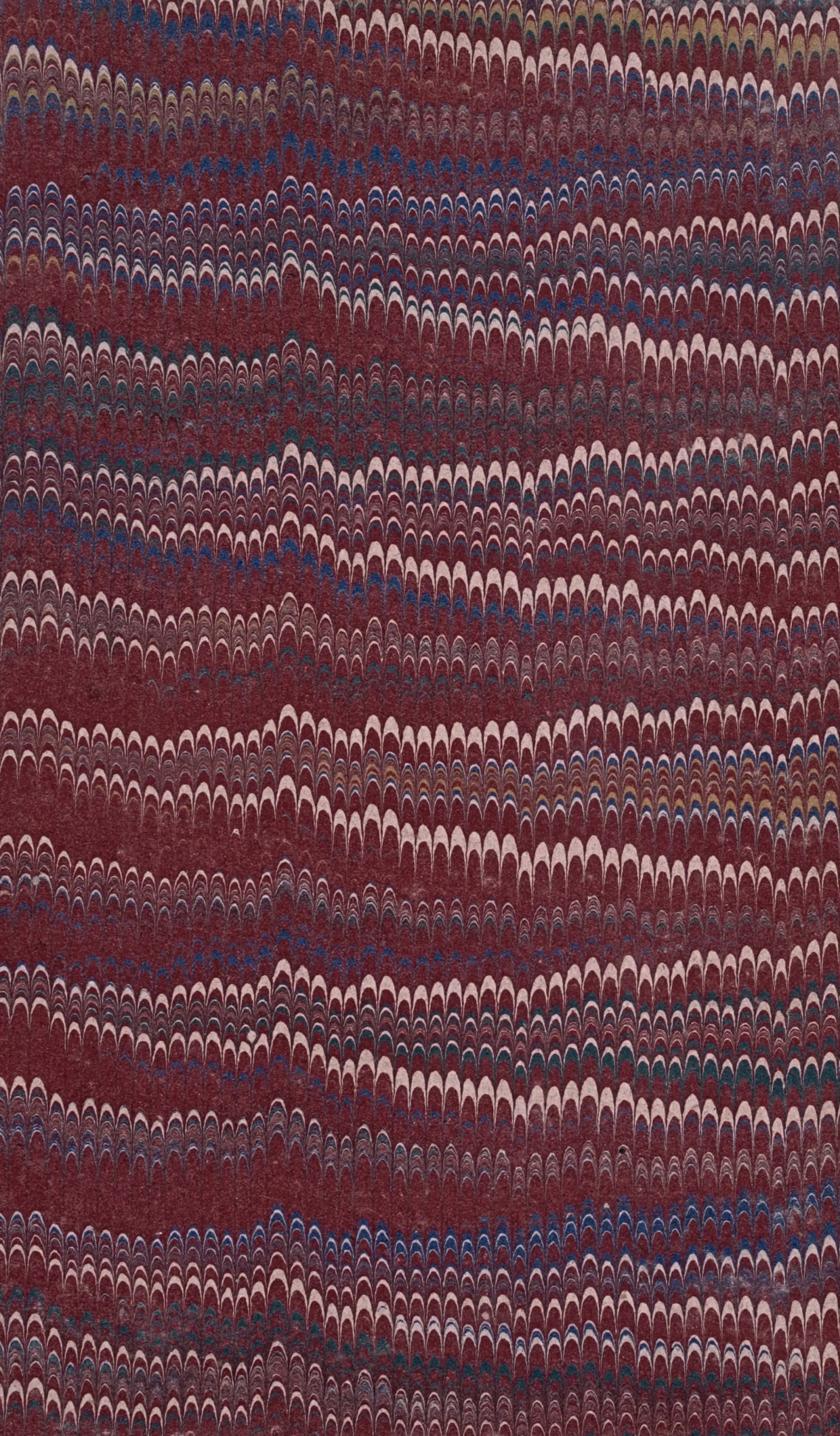

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